

DANGAN GARDEN



Foreword

The DanganGarden zine was lovingly produced by its Moderators and Contributors to showcase the beauty of Danganronpa characters and the flowers that these characters give meaning to! We thank all who aided in the zine's production, and you, the reader, for helping this project reach full bloom. Please enjoy the botanical pieces of our artists and writers!







Resolutions Ending in Death

By Rose

"Now that Ikusaba-kun is here, I want an answer for this *cruel* misconduct! Reveal yourself at once if you're the culprit!"

Despite his demand reverberating throughout the classroom, Ishimaru's voice quaked. He stood by Ikusaba's desk, trembling fists clenched by his chest. His sharp glare crossed over the students, their expressions twisted and downtrodden. Eyes shifted toward one another, but no one rose to Ishimaru's command. They lapsed into silence.

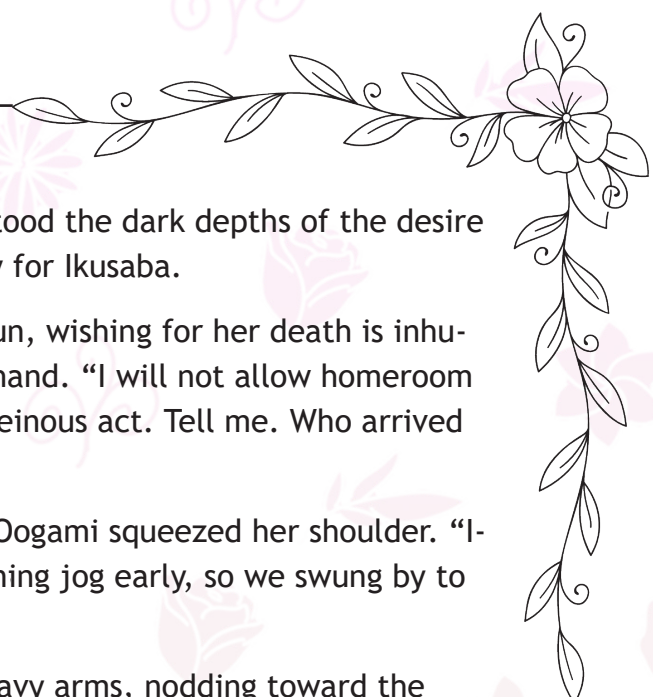
Only Kirigiri lacked their pensiveness. She rounded to the side of the table, cupping her chin. She traced the desk, but it lacked any residue. Not even dust remained. It was as if someone had cleaned the area before placing down the dreadful condemnation, an observation noted by the case's target.

Like Kirigiri, who knelt to peer under the chair, Ikusaba hadn't spoken a word. Although she was the victim, she hardly acted like one. Anyone would have wept or complained, but she bit her tongue as always. She had come to homeroom facing a clamor. It was an uproar of confused voices that hushed upon her arrival. Ikusaba had examined their wary gazes, tense postures, and soft-spoken murmurs, which confused her until she noticed the source of their consternation.

A glass vase filled with water was on her desk. The still liquid shimmered under the lights, so clear that she saw her blank reflection perfectly mirrored. And in it, the white chrysanthemum was in full bloom.

It was gorgeous from a distance, reserved for gardens and bouquets. But by its lonesome, the intention wasn't kind. It blossomed out of hostility. If the vase wasn't on *her* desk, Ikusaba might have believed Asahina or Fujisaki brought it in as another classroom decoration.

But she wasn't a fool. Neither were her classmates. They shackled themselves to each other in displays of friendship, their bonds waiting to be snapped



in half when the time came, but they understood the dark depths of the desire of whoever had arranged the vase specifically for Ikusaba.

“Whatever qualm you have with Ikusaba-kun, wishing for her death is inhumane!” Ishimaru bellowed, thrusting out his hand. “I will not allow homeroom to begin without a proper resolution to this heinous act. Tell me. Who arrived first?”

Asahina quickly spoke. She trembled, and Oogami squeezed her shoulder. “It was us. Sakura-chan and I finished our morning jog early, so we swung by to relax.”

“Upon our arrival-” Oogami crossed her heavy arms, nodding toward the vase. “-it was already here. To clarify, no one was in or leaving the room when we arrived.”

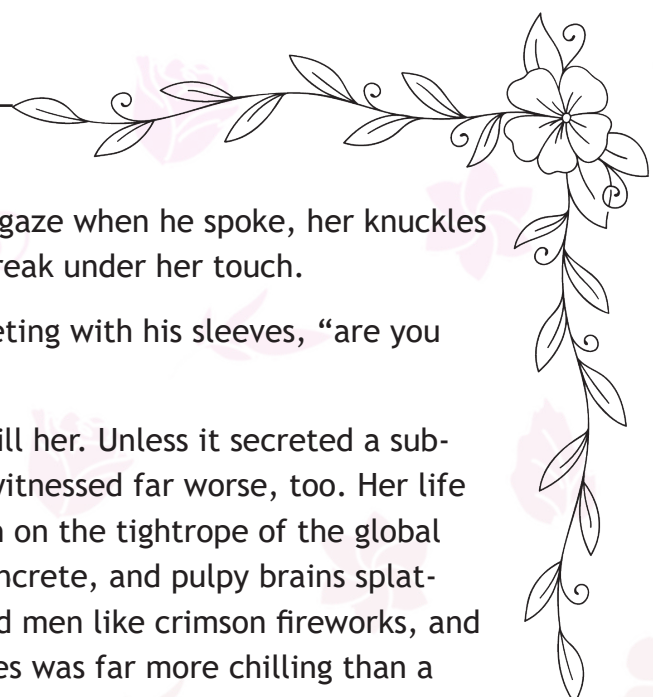
Ishimaru grimaced. Cracks formed along his composed expression. “I understand. I doubt you two would wish such ill will on Ikusaba-kun.”

Asahina gasped. “Of course not! She’s a nice, quiet person. I can’t believe you’d accuse us of trying to hurt our friend.”

As Ishimaru defended himself, Ikusaba raised an eyebrow at Asahina’s compliments. She, herself, wasn’t one to mince words. Her comments were curt, clipped, and almost painfully to the point. Engaging in warfare was far more straightforward than managing a casual conversation with a classmate. She didn’t need to mind her awkwardness or remember popular trends when focused on navigating through heavy artillery; a bullet to the head silenced her enemy before they grasped her presence.

In that regard, she supposed she was quiet. She only spoke when given the time of day. Asahina and Oogami often asked her to work out with them. Ishimaru offered his assistance with her studies. Maizono had invited her and the other girls out shopping after school many times, and Ikusaba obliged only twice when pressured by her sister. Even Celes suggested a spot of tea in the courtyard when Ikusaba walked by her, suppressing a scowl when Celes commented that the soldier hadn’t bothered to say hello.

And there was one boy who always welcomed her. Concern pooled in his plain eyes. He looked up at her, an apology written on his face. Unlike her, his



soul was untainted. She wanted to lower her gaze when he spoke, her knuckles grazing the petals that felt like they would break under her touch.

“Hey, Ikusaba-san,” Naegi murmured, fidgeting with his sleeves, “are you okay? You haven’t said anything.”

It wasn’t as if the chrysanthemum would kill her. Unless it secreted a subtle, scentless poison, she was safe. She had witnessed far worse, too. Her life balanced precariously between life and death on the tightrope of the global battlefield. Blood smeared on the cracked concrete, and pulpy brains splattered against brick walls. Landmines exploded men like crimson fireworks, and the putrid odor of decaying and bloated bodies was far more chilling than a jarringly white flower.

Its purpose was clear, but she’d live. She always survived. And if anyone wished her dead, she’d eliminate them before their finger could twitch against the trigger.

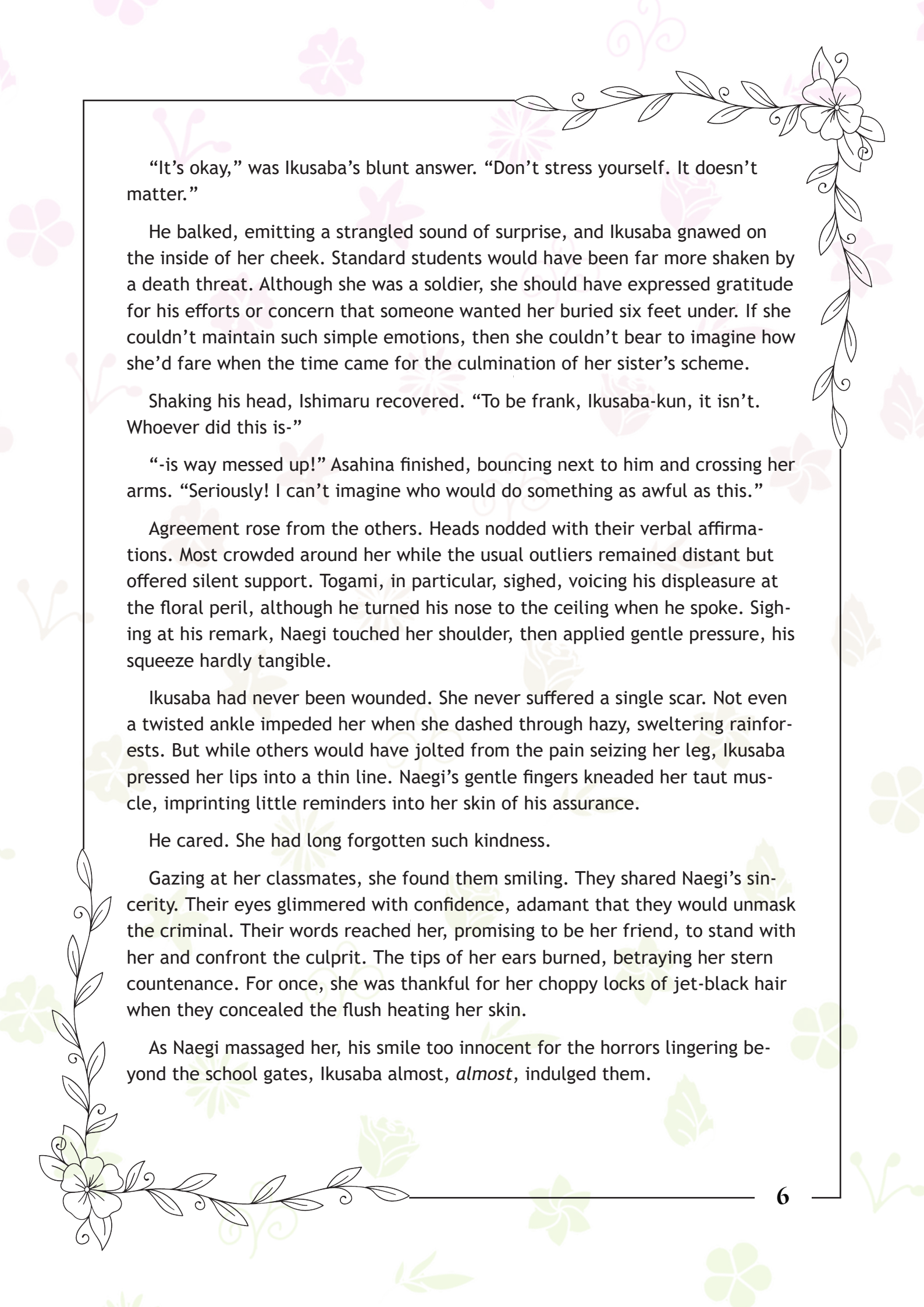
“Um, Ikusaba-san?”

Lost in her thoughts, she stared blankly at Naegi, who scratched his cheek. Realizing the inappropriate length of her silence, she cleared her throat. “Sorry. I’m sure it wasn’t anyone here. It doesn’t make sense for it to be.”

Naegi’s cheeks were dimpled. “That’s right. We’re your friends, Ikusaba-san. We’ll make sure this person doesn’t get away with it.”

She nodded, her mask refusing to slip. Her classmates were as Enoshima predicted. They were kind individuals. None of them would ever want Ikusaba to die. If such an impossibility occurred, they’d mourn, or at least, most would. She envisioned Celes and Togami’s indifference, but they lacked the necessary cruelty to outright implement a pox upon her wellbeing. Unless provided with the required motivations and an environment thriving with despair, her classmates were tethered to each other and herself, hand-in-hand.

“Ikusaba-kun, I regret to admit it, but it seems that after a quick questioning, none of us are the culprits,” Ishimaru stated, matching Ikusaba’s train of thought. “No one had the means or time to do something like this. I’m-” He cleared his throat, furrowing his brow. “-I’m deeply sorry this happened. If I came earlier than my usual time, then I could have caught them red-handed.”



“It’s okay,” was Ikusaba’s blunt answer. “Don’t stress yourself. It doesn’t matter.”

He balked, emitting a strangled sound of surprise, and Ikusaba gnawed on the inside of her cheek. Standard students would have been far more shaken by a death threat. Although she was a soldier, she should have expressed gratitude for his efforts or concern that someone wanted her buried six feet under. If she couldn’t maintain such simple emotions, then she couldn’t bear to imagine how she’d fare when the time came for the culmination of her sister’s scheme.

Shaking his head, Ishimaru recovered. “To be frank, Ikusaba-kun, it isn’t. Whoever did this is-”

“-is way messed up!” Asahina finished, bouncing next to him and crossing her arms. “Seriously! I can’t imagine who would do something as awful as this.”

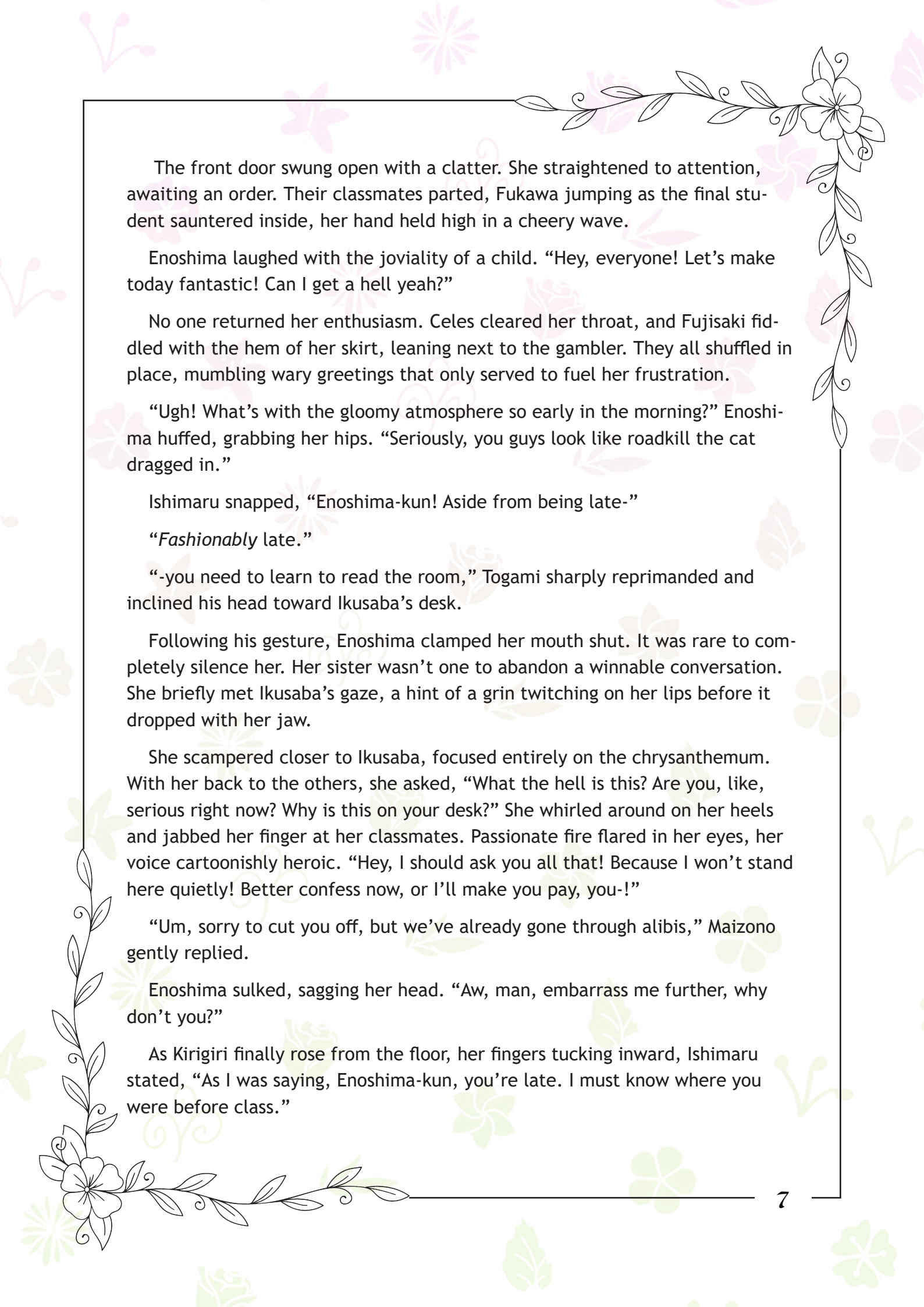
Agreement rose from the others. Heads nodded with their verbal affirmations. Most crowded around her while the usual outliers remained distant but offered silent support. Togami, in particular, sighed, voicing his displeasure at the floral peril, although he turned his nose to the ceiling when he spoke. Sighing at his remark, Naegi touched her shoulder, then applied gentle pressure, his squeeze hardly tangible.

Ikusaba had never been wounded. She never suffered a single scar. Not even a twisted ankle impeded her when she dashed through hazy, sweltering rainforests. But while others would have jolted from the pain seizing her leg, Ikusaba pressed her lips into a thin line. Naegi’s gentle fingers kneaded her taut muscle, imprinting little reminders into her skin of his assurance.

He cared. She had long forgotten such kindness.

Gazing at her classmates, she found them smiling. They shared Naegi’s sincerity. Their eyes glimmered with confidence, adamant that they would unmask the criminal. Their words reached her, promising to be her friend, to stand with her and confront the culprit. The tips of her ears burned, betraying her stern countenance. For once, she was thankful for her choppy locks of jet-black hair when they concealed the flush heating her skin.

As Naegi massaged her, his smile too innocent for the horrors lingering beyond the school gates, Ikusaba almost, *almost*, indulged them.



The front door swung open with a clatter. She straightened to attention, awaiting an order. Their classmates parted, Fukawa jumping as the final student sauntered inside, her hand held high in a cheery wave.

Enoshima laughed with the joviality of a child. "Hey, everyone! Let's make today fantastic! Can I get a hell yeah?"

No one returned her enthusiasm. Celes cleared her throat, and Fujisaki fiddled with the hem of her skirt, leaning next to the gambler. They all shuffled in place, mumbling wary greetings that only served to fuel her frustration.

"Ugh! What's with the gloomy atmosphere so early in the morning?" Enoshima huffed, grabbing her hips. "Seriously, you guys look like roadkill the cat dragged in."

Ishimaru snapped, "Enoshima-kun! Aside from being late—"

"Fashionably late."

"—you need to learn to read the room," Togami sharply reprimanded and inclined his head toward Ikusaba's desk.

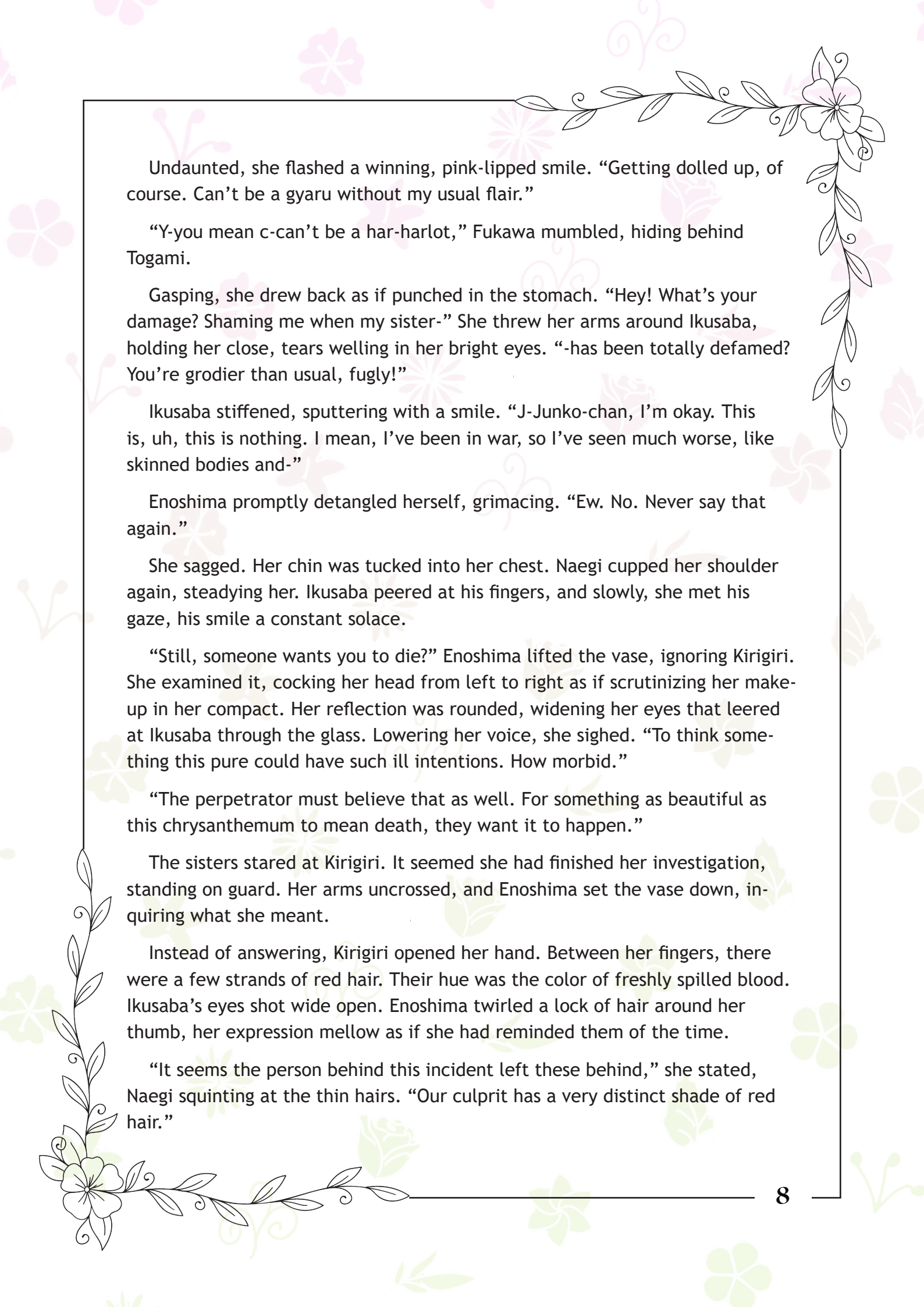
Following his gesture, Enoshima clamped her mouth shut. It was rare to completely silence her. Her sister wasn't one to abandon a winnable conversation. She briefly met Ikusaba's gaze, a hint of a grin twitching on her lips before it dropped with her jaw.

She scampered closer to Ikusaba, focused entirely on the chrysanthemum. With her back to the others, she asked, "What the hell is this? Are you, like, serious right now? Why is this on your desk?" She whirled around on her heels and jabbed her finger at her classmates. Passionate fire flared in her eyes, her voice cartoonishly heroic. "Hey, I should ask you all that! Because I won't stand here quietly! Better confess now, or I'll make you pay, you-!"

"Um, sorry to cut you off, but we've already gone through alibis," Maizono gently replied.

Enoshima sulked, sagging her head. "Aw, man, embarrass me further, why don't you?"

As Kirigiri finally rose from the floor, her fingers tucking inward, Ishimaru stated, "As I was saying, Enoshima-kun, you're late. I must know where you were before class."



Undaunted, she flashed a winning, pink-lipped smile. "Getting dolled up, of course. Can't be a gyaru without my usual flair."

"Y-you mean c-can't be a har-harlot," Fukawa mumbled, hiding behind Togami.

Gasping, she drew back as if punched in the stomach. "Hey! What's your damage? Shaming me when my sister-" She threw her arms around Ikusaba, holding her close, tears welling in her bright eyes. "-has been totally defamed? You're grodier than usual, fugly!"

Ikusaba stiffened, sputtering with a smile. "J-Junko-chan, I'm okay. This is, uh, this is nothing. I mean, I've been in war, so I've seen much worse, like skinned bodies and-"

Enoshima promptly detangled herself, grimacing. "Ew. No. Never say that again."

She sagged. Her chin was tucked into her chest. Naegi cupped her shoulder again, steadying her. Ikusaba peered at his fingers, and slowly, she met his gaze, his smile a constant solace.

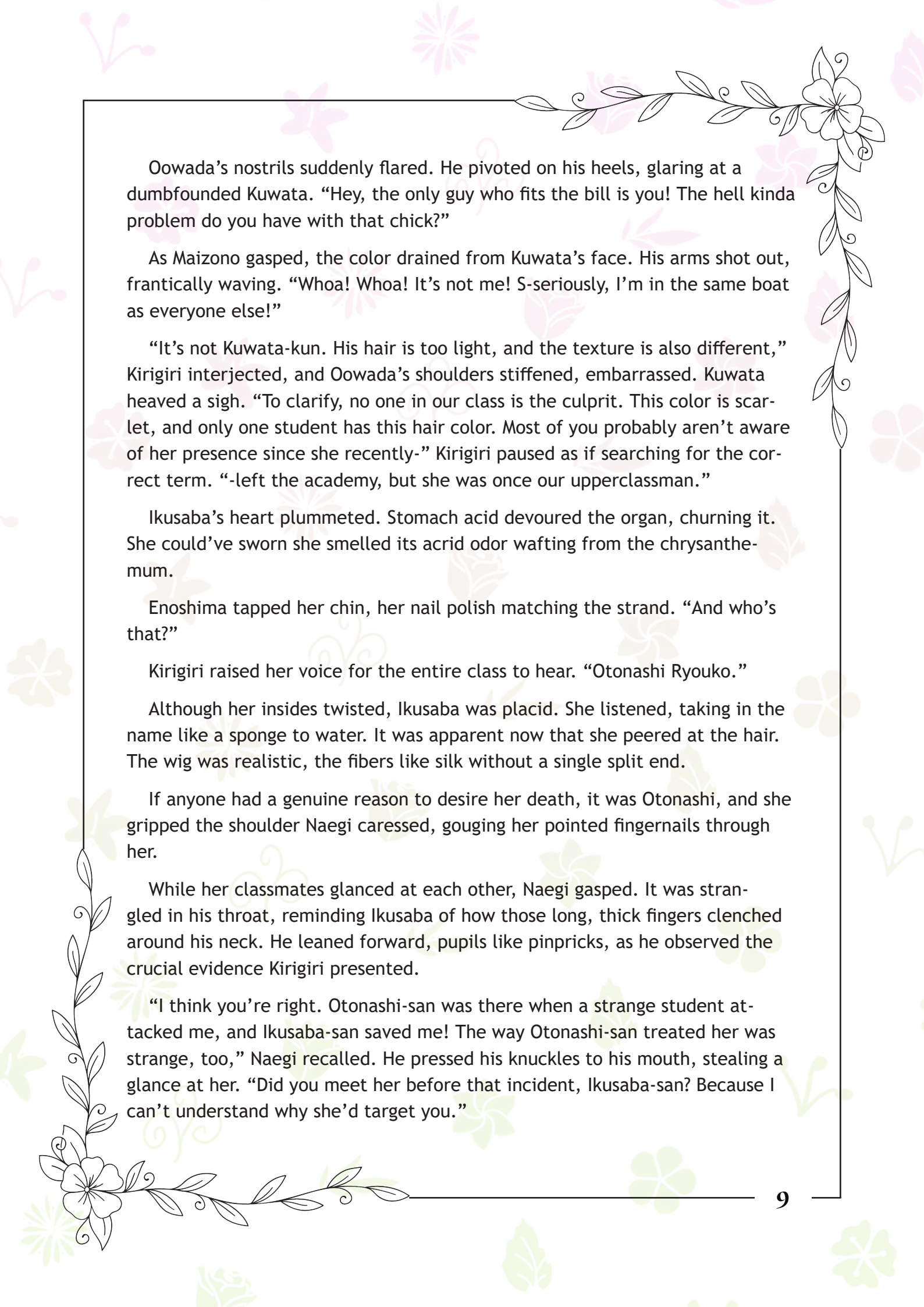
"Still, someone wants you to die?" Enoshima lifted the vase, ignoring Kirigiri. She examined it, cocking her head from left to right as if scrutinizing her make-up in her compact. Her reflection was rounded, widening her eyes that leered at Ikusaba through the glass. Lowering her voice, she sighed. "To think something this pure could have such ill intentions. How morbid."

"The perpetrator must believe that as well. For something as beautiful as this chrysanthemum to mean death, they want it to happen."

The sisters stared at Kirigiri. It seemed she had finished her investigation, standing on guard. Her arms uncrossed, and Enoshima set the vase down, inquiring what she meant.

Instead of answering, Kirigiri opened her hand. Between her fingers, there were a few strands of red hair. Their hue was the color of freshly spilled blood. Ikusaba's eyes shot wide open. Enoshima twirled a lock of hair around her thumb, her expression mellow as if she had reminded them of the time.

"It seems the person behind this incident left these behind," she stated, Naegi squinting at the thin hairs. "Our culprit has a very distinct shade of red hair."



Oowada's nostrils suddenly flared. He pivoted on his heels, glaring at a dumbfounded Kuwata. "Hey, the only guy who fits the bill is you! The hell kinda problem do you have with that chick?"

As Maizono gasped, the color drained from Kuwata's face. His arms shot out, frantically waving. "Whoa! Whoa! It's not me! S-seriously, I'm in the same boat as everyone else!"

"It's not Kuwata-kun. His hair is too light, and the texture is also different," Kirigiri interjected, and Oowada's shoulders stiffened, embarrassed. Kuwata heaved a sigh. "To clarify, no one in our class is the culprit. This color is scarlet, and only one student has this hair color. Most of you probably aren't aware of her presence since she recently-" Kirigiri paused as if searching for the correct term. "-left the academy, but she was once our upperclassman."

Ikusaba's heart plummeted. Stomach acid devoured the organ, churning it. She could've sworn she smelled its acrid odor wafting from the chrysanthemum.

Enoshima tapped her chin, her nail polish matching the strand. "And who's that?"

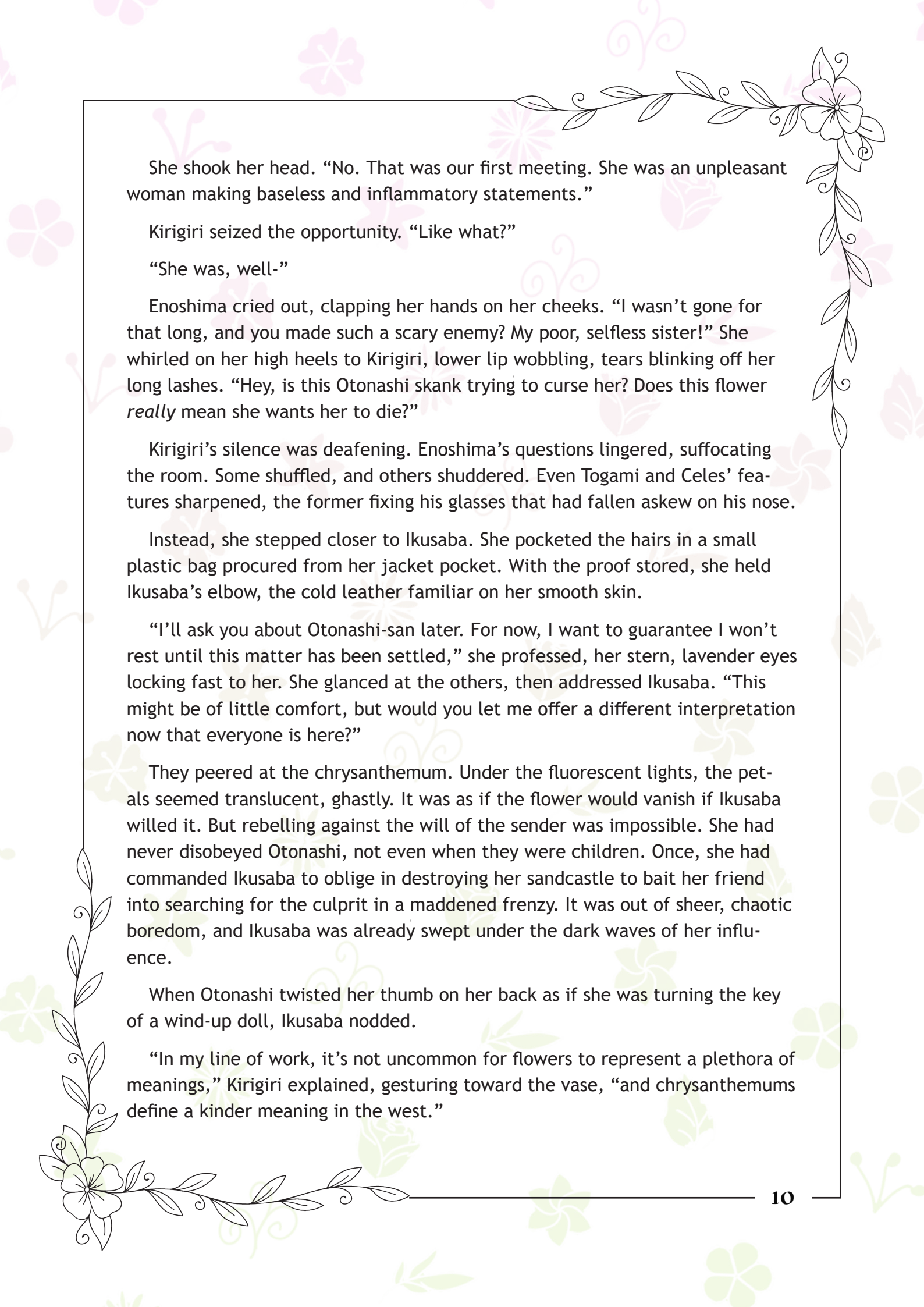
Kirigiri raised her voice for the entire class to hear. "Otonashi Ryouko."

Although her insides twisted, Ikusaba was placid. She listened, taking in the name like a sponge to water. It was apparent now that she peered at the hair. The wig was realistic, the fibers like silk without a single split end.

If anyone had a genuine reason to desire her death, it was Otonashi, and she gripped the shoulder Naegi caressed, gouging her pointed fingernails through her.

While her classmates glanced at each other, Naegi gasped. It was strangled in his throat, reminding Ikusaba of how those long, thick fingers clenched around his neck. He leaned forward, pupils like pinpricks, as he observed the crucial evidence Kirigiri presented.

"I think you're right. Otonashi-san was there when a strange student attacked me, and Ikusaba-san saved me! The way Otonashi-san treated her was strange, too," Naegi recalled. He pressed his knuckles to his mouth, stealing a glance at her. "Did you meet her before that incident, Ikusaba-san? Because I can't understand why she'd target you."



She shook her head. "No. That was our first meeting. She was an unpleasant woman making baseless and inflammatory statements."

Kirigiri seized the opportunity. "Like what?"

"She was, well—"

Enoshima cried out, clapping her hands on her cheeks. "I wasn't gone for that long, and you made such a scary enemy? My poor, selfless sister!" She whirled on her high heels to Kirigiri, lower lip wobbling, tears blinking off her long lashes. "Hey, is this Otonashi skank trying to curse her? Does this flower *really* mean she wants her to die?"

Kirigiri's silence was deafening. Enoshima's questions lingered, suffocating the room. Some shuffled, and others shuddered. Even Togami and Celes' features sharpened, the former fixing his glasses that had fallen askew on his nose.

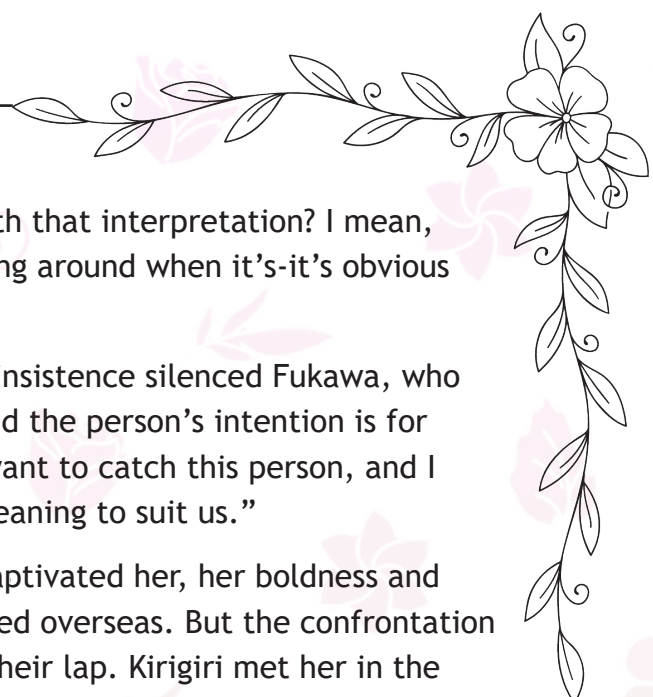
Instead, she stepped closer to Ikusaba. She pocketed the hairs in a small plastic bag procured from her jacket pocket. With the proof stored, she held Ikusaba's elbow, the cold leather familiar on her smooth skin.

"I'll ask you about Otonashi-san later. For now, I want to guarantee I won't rest until this matter has been settled," she professed, her stern, lavender eyes locking fast to her. She glanced at the others, then addressed Ikusaba. "This might be of little comfort, but would you let me offer a different interpretation now that everyone is here?"

They peered at the chrysanthemum. Under the fluorescent lights, the petals seemed translucent, ghastly. It was as if the flower would vanish if Ikusaba willed it. But rebelling against the will of the sender was impossible. She had never disobeyed Otonashi, not even when they were children. Once, she had commanded Ikusaba to oblige in destroying her sandcastle to bait her friend into searching for the culprit in a maddened frenzy. It was out of sheer, chaotic boredom, and Ikusaba was already swept under the dark waves of her influence.

When Otonashi twisted her thumb on her back as if she was turning the key of a wind-up doll, Ikusaba nodded.

"In my line of work, it's not uncommon for flowers to represent a plethora of meanings," Kirigiri explained, gesturing toward the vase, "and chrysanthemums define a kinder meaning in the west."



Fukawa groaned. “O-oh, y-you’re going with that interpretation? I mean, it’s in b-bad taste to twist the-the-the meaning around when it’s-it’s obvious s-someone wants to hurt her.”

“But it’s a way to make things right.” Her insistence silenced Fukawa, who chewed on her thumbnail. “While I understand the person’s intention is for harm, we’ve been united against them. We want to catch this person, and I believe that’s enough to change the initial meaning to suit us.”

Ikusaba couldn’t divert her eyes. Kirigiri captivated her, her boldness and strength mimicking the soldiers she had battled overseas. But the confrontation hadn’t ended in the enemy’s guts spilling in their lap. Kirigiri met her in the middle. Her gloved hand pressed down on her tense shoulder, and Ikusaba felt the muscle underneath her skin tightening again. It was almost enough for her to break through the water’s surface and breathe.

Ikusaba swallowed. Saltwater filled her lungs. “And...that is?”


She lowered her voice, their classmates surrounding them, her conviction more poignant than Ikusaba’s resolve. “Friendship. Well-being. As promised, we won’t allow this cruelty to go unsolved,” she vowed, offering her hand.

Ikusaba brought her fist to her chest, releasing a sigh she hadn’t realized was held. She clung to Kirigiri, who had reached out and grasped her. She curled her fingers around Ikusaba’s palm, bringing her closer, away from Enoshima’s hold. Only she heard the subdued gasp from her sister.

Kirigiri’s promise filled the room. “Trust us, Ikusaba-san. Otonashi Ryouko might’ve been expelled from Hope’s Peak, but she will be brought to justice.”

A chorus of agreement resounded. Asahina pumped her fists in the air, and Ishimaru laughed heartily, promising to assist Kirigiri. She heard Oowada cracking his knuckles again, determined to take the culprit head-on, an oath Oogami emulated. Even Togami suggested examining the security camera footage would be an engaging pastime, followed by Yamada shouting their culprit might have used an invisibility cloak and Hagakure proposing aliens. Togami promptly ignored them.

Their enthusiasm washed over Ikusaba. They were gentle waves nudging her toward the sun shining through the water’s surface. She took in a sharp breath, her chest heaving. It was her first taken of her own accord. She searched everyone, memorizing the angles in their smiles and the fires blazing in their irises,



shining for her sake. On the battlefield, such weakness would have been executed without hesitation.

But when Naegi lifted the vase, the pure white petals tickling his neck, he smiled at her. “Kirigiri-san’s right. You can count on us, Ikusaba-san, because we won’t abandon you.”

Blood rushed to her freckled cheeks only when he smiled at her. She had relished in that gentle warmth flushing her face, soothing her concerns. Not even in the warzones when her skin roasted from the heat rising from the asphalt, where she rose above the rabble, had she felt comfortable in her skin until she met Naegi.

But among the others, that sentiment remained. Ikusaba was surrounded by people giving her the same smiles as Naegi, welcoming her. She had never belonged with them, not as someone so entrenched in despair. And yet, for the second time, Ikusaba was a component of Class 78. She wondered if that blossoming, rosy heat swelling in her chest was what they called hope.

She looked at the flower. It had once dripped with ill intentions, with unmasked cruelty. Now, its snow white petals were pure, baptized by her classmates’ compassion. If everyone perceived the chrysanthemum as a symbol of unity, bringing them together to defend one of their own, she agreed with a twitching grin.

A quiet chuckle ghosted past Enoshima’s lips. “Onee-chan, isn’t this incredible? You’ve made lots of friends, haven’t you? Your ties transcended an omen,” she wondered softly.

Ikusaba’s bloodstream froze. In an instant, the shark gnashed its fangs around her ankle. She was dragged down, down, down, forgotten by the air and sun. In too deep, the beast spat her into the whirlpool, swallowing her whole.

She closed the gap between them, hugging around the small of Ikusaba’s back. In her ear, while her sister shuddered, Enoshima hissed, “In the end, it’s white despair.”

With a gasp, Ikusaba embraced her sister. Enoshima released her the second her palms touched her shoulder blades. Naegi asked her where she wanted the vase, and Enoshima took charge, directing him to the teacher’s desk. Conversations arose, comforting and assuring Ikusaba of what would become

of Otonashi. The morning routine returned to normal, the friendly atmosphere arriving as if it had never abandoned them.

Their words were television static between her ears. She was isolated, tugged out like a weed. Enoshima's vice grip around her neck mimicked how Madarai strangled Naegi. But while he resisted, like a good soldier, Ikusaba obeyed. Even if her heart had plummeted into her stomach, the acid searing through it, she stayed in line, boots together and ties severed.

She knew her sister wanted her dead. That despair would be an ultimate thrill, a pinnacle of ecstasy unable to be recreated. When Enoshima smirked at her, Ikusaba closed her eyes and imagined how it would come to pass.

Tomorrow arrived, and the faces of Class 78 were pale. They were silent, entitling the screeches of the parade to penetrate the walls.

Everyone had white chrysanthemums on their desks. In their stupefaction, Ikusaba alone caught her sister's Cheshire cat grin. As Ishimaru bellowed his demand to know who had done it, Ikusaba felt the cold metal of the trimmers in her back pocket, the sole indication she had clipped them out of the garden under the velvet guise of the prior evening.

It was all according to her sister's resolve. Everyone would die, but when Naegi still smiled at her, hope glimmering like stars in his eyes, Ikusaba pondered if their mutual destiny, as foretold by the chrysanthemums, would be overturned or if they'd wilt.





Quinn

Bookmarks

By Zipsunz

FRONT



asphodel; my regrets follow you to the grave
heather; good luck
chrysanthemum (white); truth



petunia; resentment, anger, your presence soothes me
columbine (purple); resolve to win
hyacinth (purple); sorrow, please forgive me



forget-me-not; true love, faithfulness, remembrance
meadow saffron; my best days are past
mock orange; deceit



black dahlia; betrayal, dishonesty
dog rose; pain, pleasure
poppy; eternal sleep, oblivion

BACK







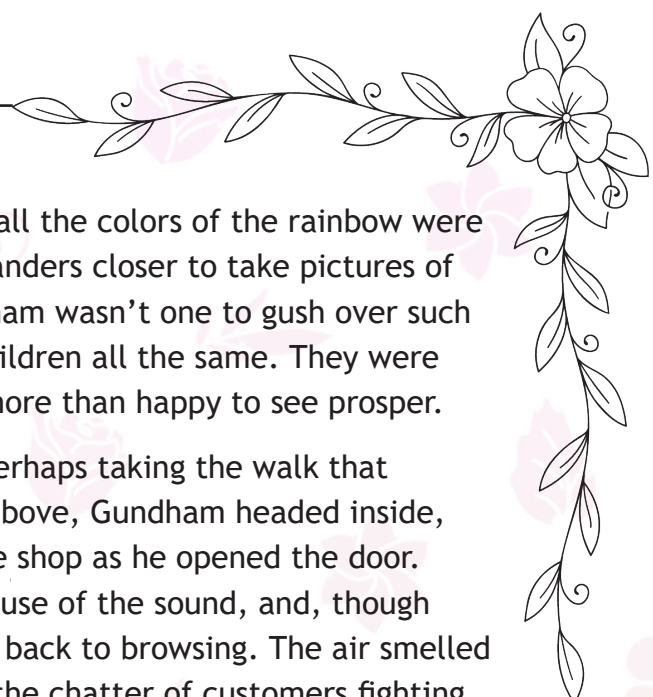
The Budding Love that Blazes Through the Heart!

By Red

Peko Pekoyama, Ultimate Swordsman. Student of Class 77-B in Hope's Peak Academy. Gundham underestimated her—not her given skills, of course, but her magical ability. He had assumed that surely, a melee fighter like her couldn't have enchanted the great Overlord of Ice with a spell powerful enough to intrude into his mind, to seep into his thoughts, and yet he couldn't fathom any other reason as to why he found himself thinking of her red eyes, colored the same as a ripe Fuji apple in the late spring, or her hair, the shining silver threads cascading into a waterfall of liquid mercury each time she undid her braids.


Gundham shook his head, realizing his mind had drifted towards Peko against his will once again, his attempt to clear his mind having the opposite effect. Gundham stalked forward on the busy weekend street without much purpose, just needing to find a way to mull over his thoughts without disrupting the Devas and other beasts he kept in his dorm. His large strides along the sidewalk, combined with the heavy stomp of his boots and his generally off-putting appearance made strangers clear the way for him. If they were whispering about his eccentricities, he heeded them none. His attention was on his surroundings, as he caught himself in an unfamiliar section of the city. Gundham grumbled into his scarf, annoyed that he had gone far past the perimeter of the school. Luckily he had just been walking in one direction, so heading back seemed a simple endeavor. Yet he found himself even more frustrated at the thought of having gone all this way just to turn back empty-handed. Curse his indecisiveness! What did his soul yearn for?!

Gundham looked around with wild turns of his head, as if asking his surroundings for guidance. Well, if he wanted a sign, he found one in the form of a printed arrow that pointed towards a shop with an outdoor section of plants,

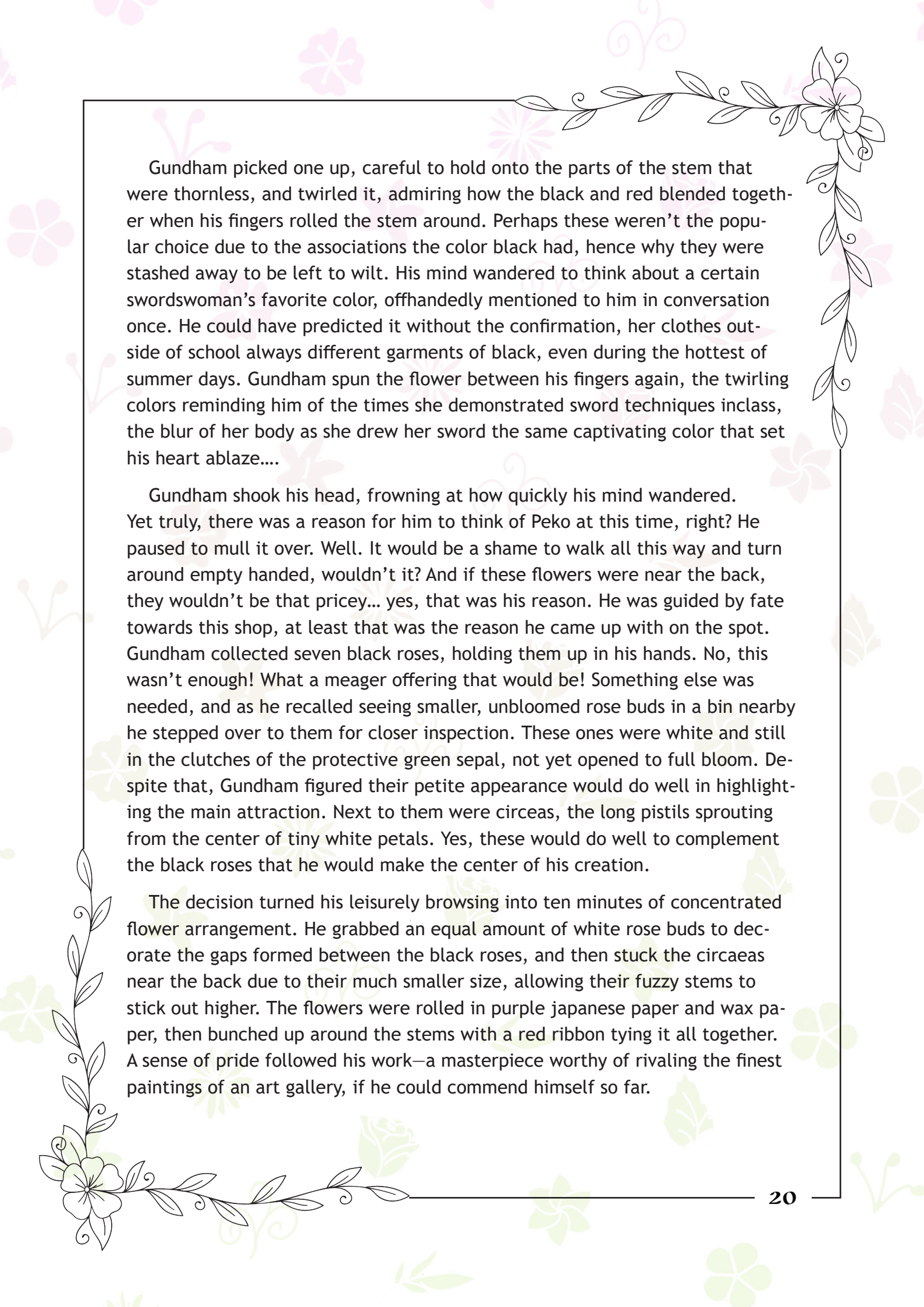


indicating its main wares. Rows of flowers in all the colors of the rainbow were on display, eye-catching enough to coax bystanders closer to take pictures of them, or even better, bring one home. Gundham wasn't one to gush over such things, but he did respect Mother Nature's children all the same. They were another faction of the mortal realm he was more than happy to see prosper.

Drawn in by some otherworldly force, or perhaps taking the walk that brought him here as an omen from the gods above, Gundham headed inside, the chime of the bells echoing throughout the shop as he opened the door. Some heads instinctively turned to see the cause of the sound, and, though some gazes lingered, most immediately went back to browsing. The air smelled of fertilizer, the buzz of the ceiling fans and the chatter of customers fighting against each other for the position of dominant sound. There weren't many workers, just one teenager organizing stacks of pots and an elderly man behind the cashier, busy with a transaction judging from the way he was punching buttons on his calculator, alongside the sight of a woman carrying a large sprig of bamboo standing rigidly in a pot. Gundham slowly took in his surroundings as he walked by the rows of flowers, more plain compared to the plants that were on display outdoors. Most were beautiful in their own right, but lacked the pop of their older counterparts' colored petals or large leaves. They were rather young too, only their tiny stems and a small popsicle sign stuck into the dirt telling of the species to a novice gardener like himself. In comparison to the colorful outdoor flowers, these still needed to be tended to, and allowed time to grow, like kittens who needed the nurturing care of their mother's milk before they could be tamed into ferocious, magnificent hunters.



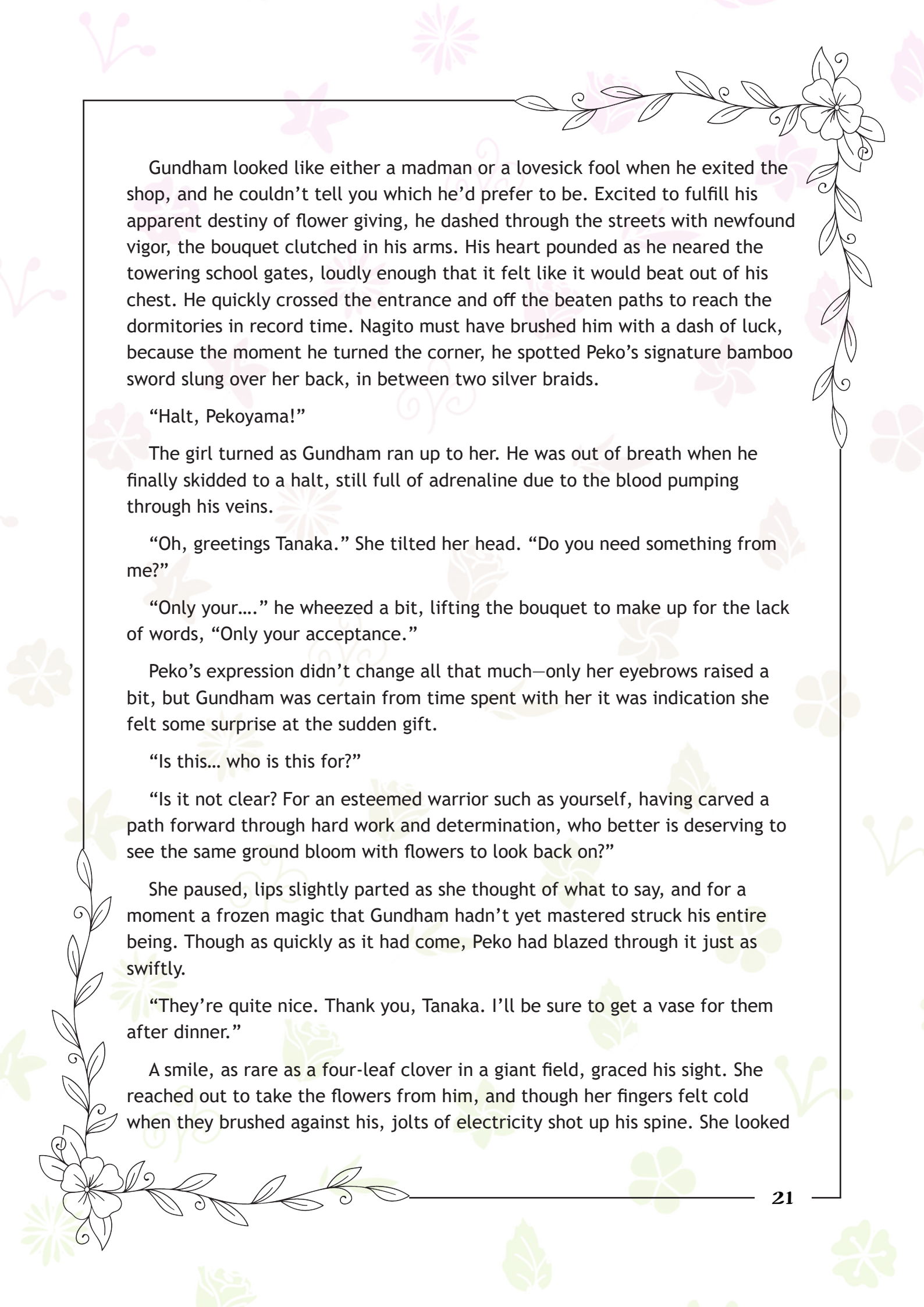
Gundham spent a few more minutes strolling around the store, but none of the flowers were particularly tempting to purchase. Some he recognized as already in the massive indoor garden in Hope's Peak, the rest he simply deemed uninteresting. He was about to leave, when something that had been hidden from view caught his eye. Behind a stack of pots were roses with black petals, overlapping each other to create a circular pattern towards the center, growing from the top of a thick, dark green stem littered in thorns that were hastily cut. Gundham's curiosity piqued as he approached the flowers, reaching out his fingers to feel the rose. Its petals had a velvety quality to them, confirming it was a real flower and not a plastic one. They resembled fallen demons, helped in part by the traces of blood red left over from the flower's pre-dyed color.



Gundham picked one up, careful to hold onto the parts of the stem that were thornless, and twirled it, admiring how the black and red blended together when his fingers rolled the stem around. Perhaps these weren't the popular choice due to the associations the color black had, hence why they were stashed away to be left to wilt. His mind wandered to think about a certain swordswoman's favorite color, offhandedly mentioned to him in conversation once. He could have predicted it without the confirmation, her clothes outside of school always different garments of black, even during the hottest of summer days. Gundham spun the flower between his fingers again, the twirling colors reminding him of the times she demonstrated sword techniques in class, the blur of her body as she drew her sword the same captivating color that set his heart ablaze....

Gundham shook his head, frowning at how quickly his mind wandered. Yet truly, there was a reason for him to think of Peko at this time, right? He paused to mull it over. Well. It would be a shame to walk all this way and turn around empty handed, wouldn't it? And if these flowers were near the back, they wouldn't be that pricey... yes, that was his reason. He was guided by fate towards this shop, at least that was the reason he came up with on the spot. Gundham collected seven black roses, holding them up in his hands. No, this wasn't enough! What a meager offering that would be! Something else was needed, and as he recalled seeing smaller, unbloomed rose buds in a bin nearby he stepped over to them for closer inspection. These ones were white and still in the clutches of the protective green sepal, not yet opened to full bloom. Despite that, Gundham figured their petite appearance would do well in highlighting the main attraction. Next to them were circeas, the long pistils sprouting from the center of tiny white petals. Yes, these would do well to complement the black roses that he would make the center of his creation.

The decision turned his leisurely browsing into ten minutes of concentrated flower arrangement. He grabbed an equal amount of white rose buds to decorate the gaps formed between the black roses, and then stuck the circeas near the back due to their much smaller size, allowing their fuzzy stems to stick out higher. The flowers were rolled in purple japanese paper and wax paper, then bunched up around the stems with a red ribbon tying it all together. A sense of pride followed his work—a masterpiece worthy of rivaling the finest paintings of an art gallery, if he could commend himself so far.



Gundham looked like either a madman or a lovesick fool when he exited the shop, and he couldn't tell you which he'd prefer to be. Excited to fulfill his apparent destiny of flower giving, he dashed through the streets with newfound vigor, the bouquet clutched in his arms. His heart pounded as he neared the towering school gates, loudly enough that it felt like it would beat out of his chest. He quickly crossed the entrance and off the beaten paths to reach the dormitories in record time. Nagito must have brushed him with a dash of luck, because the moment he turned the corner, he spotted Peko's signature bamboo sword slung over her back, in between two silver braids.

"Halt, Pekoyama!"

The girl turned as Gundham ran up to her. He was out of breath when he finally skidded to a halt, still full of adrenaline due to the blood pumping through his veins.

"Oh, greetings Tanaka." She tilted her head. "Do you need something from me?"

"Only your...." he wheezed a bit, lifting the bouquet to make up for the lack of words, "Only your acceptance."

Peko's expression didn't change all that much—only her eyebrows raised a bit, but Gundham was certain from time spent with her it was indication she felt some surprise at the sudden gift.

"Is this... who is this for?"

"Is it not clear? For an esteemed warrior such as yourself, having carved a path forward through hard work and determination, who better is deserving to see the same ground bloom with flowers to look back on?"

She paused, lips slightly parted as she thought of what to say, and for a moment a frozen magic that Gundham hadn't yet mastered struck his entire being. Though as quickly as it had come, Peko had blazed through it just as swiftly.

"They're quite nice. Thank you, Tanaka. I'll be sure to get a vase for them after dinner."

A smile, as rare as a four-leaf clover in a giant field, graced his sight. She reached out to take the flowers from him, and though her fingers felt cold when they brushed against his, jolts of electricity shot up his spine. She looked

elegant holding the bouquet, and he was correct in assuming the black roses would complement her eyes, which were lit up in joy he hardly ever saw. He chuckled, more than satisfied at his accomplishment for the day.

“Then I shall take my leave. Enjoy the beauty this world has to offer, Pekoyama, for the Overlord of Ice has commanded it!”

Gundham waved goodbye and headed towards his room relatively composed. The moment he shut the door behind him however, he dashed forward and jumped onto his bed, burying his face into his pillow not out of embarrassment, but to contain the glee he was feeling. He could feel how big his grin was, kicking his legs up like a daydreaming schoolgirl.

Of course a mortal would accept a god’s kind offering! He never had anything to worry about! He called himself silly for his doubts, yet still felt a sense of pride welling up for a job well done, the delightful pangs his heart made unable to be contained.

Maybe he did like Peko. Just a little.









Phone Wallpapers

By PXLPASTRY



Morning glory

By Rannas

What was supposed to be a relatively uneventful meeting between most of the survivors of the 78th class started quietly enough. They chatted about their recent projects within their divisions and some good news about the state of the world. But then....

The phone rang.

Which the former SHSL Swimmer should expect at this point. Being part of Future Foundation meant dealing with lots of unexpected calls that rarely meant good news.

"Well, that was unexpected," Togami comments after hanging up the phone, pushing his glasses up his nose. Asahina waited with bated breath.

"What did they say?" Kirigiri asks, still staring intently at Togami as she had since he picked up the call from their superiors at Future Foundation. But as intelligent as she was, Asahina doubted *anyone* could get much out of Togami's single-word reply.

Togami scoffs and replies, smug as always, "Already trying to guess, aren't you, Kirigiri?" He pauses again, and Asahina is *this close* to giving him a little shove to make him stop being such a prick, but before she can—

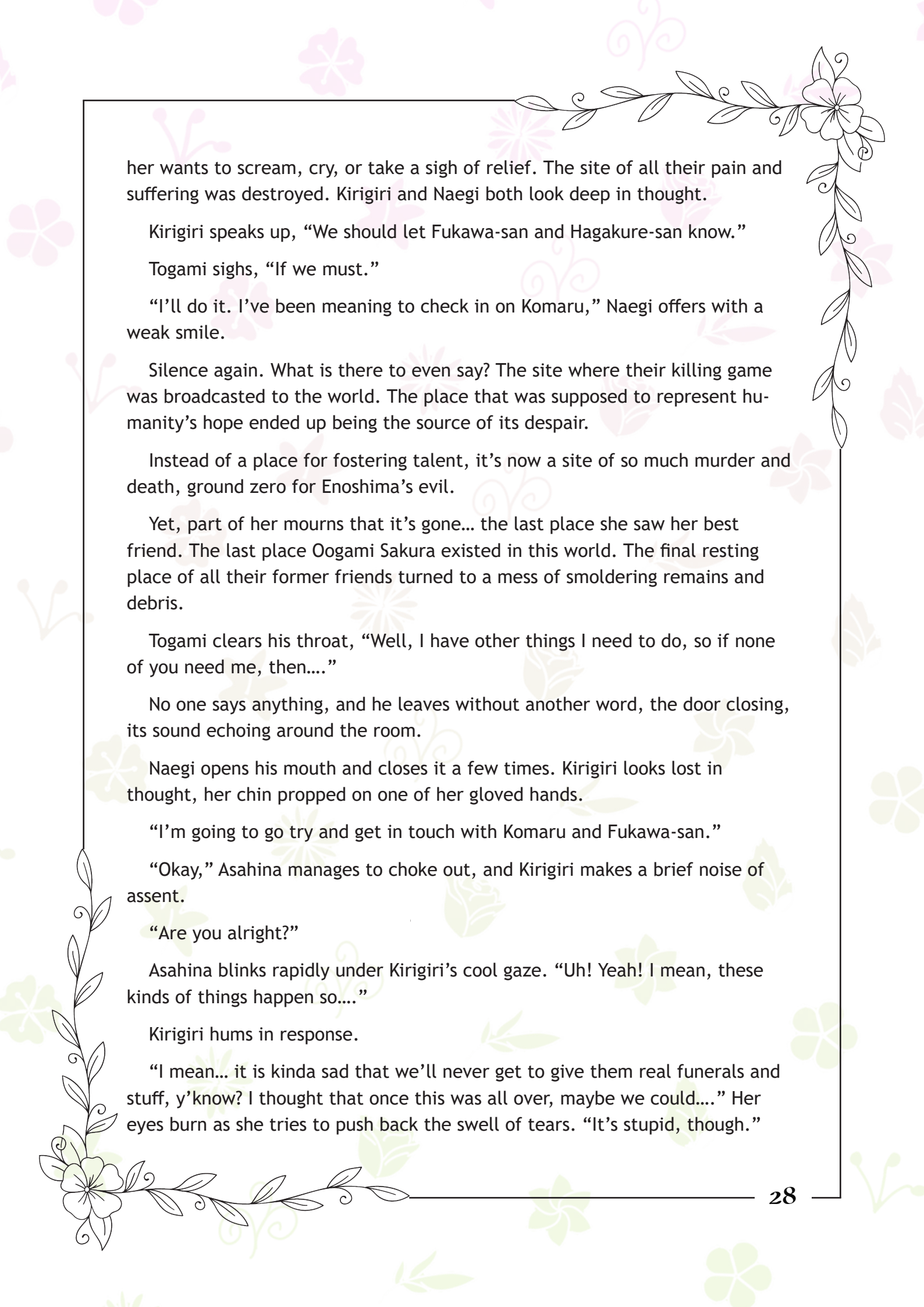
"Is it bad news?" Naegi asks, and the mood shifts. They're still trying to wipe out the pockets of tragedy that persist in the world today. The despair that Enoshima spread hasn't been easy to eradicate despite all their best efforts.

The heir's guarded expressions shifts, a dark cloud settling over his visage, "A fire broke out at the site of Hope's Peak Academy."

"What, really?" Asahina blurts out. She notices Naegi and Kirigiri shift as well.

Togami pauses, "They believe it was lightning and not arson... however, the fire wasn't contained. The site is mostly ash now."

A heavy pause. Asahina balls her fists, pressing her nails into her skin. Part of



her wants to scream, cry, or take a sigh of relief. The site of all their pain and suffering was destroyed. Kirigiri and Naegi both look deep in thought.

Kirigiri speaks up, "We should let Fukawa-san and Hagakure-san know."

Togami sighs, "If we must."

"I'll do it. I've been meaning to check in on Komaru," Naegi offers with a weak smile.

Silence again. What is there to even say? The site where their killing game was broadcasted to the world. The place that was supposed to represent humanity's hope ended up being the source of its despair.

Instead of a place for fostering talent, it's now a site of so much murder and death, ground zero for Enoshima's evil.

Yet, part of her mourns that it's gone... the last place she saw her best friend. The last place Oogami Sakura existed in this world. The final resting place of all their former friends turned to a mess of smoldering remains and debris.

Togami clears his throat, "Well, I have other things I need to do, so if none of you need me, then...."

No one says anything, and he leaves without another word, the door closing, its sound echoing around the room.

Naegi opens his mouth and closes it a few times. Kirigiri looks lost in thought, her chin propped on one of her gloved hands.

"I'm going to go try and get in touch with Komaru and Fukawa-san."

"Okay," Asahina manages to choke out, and Kirigiri makes a brief noise of assent.

"Are you alright?"

Asahina blinks rapidly under Kirigiri's cool gaze. "Uh! Yeah! I mean, these kinds of things happen so...."

Kirigiri hums in response.

"I mean... it is kinda sad that we'll never get to give them real funerals and stuff, y'know? I thought that once this was all over, maybe we could...." Her eyes burn as she tries to push back the swell of tears. "It's stupid, though."

“No. Not at all.” Kirigiri’s face softens. “They deserved a better send-off than....”

Being stuck in that bio lab, preserved from the torture they endured. The thought makes her shudder as if she was back in that chilly, awful room. But that room was gone now, and so were the remains of Sakura and all their friends.

They deserved so much better.

Asahina feels a gloved hand on her shoulder and sees a slight comforting smile on Kirigiri’s face. “Even though Hope’s Peak is gone, we will find a way to honor them.”

The tears begin to fall, but she actually *does* feel better. Comforted that even someone as practical and straightforward as Kirigiri seems to care.

A slight squeeze to her shoulder as Kirigiri raises from her seat, “Are you going to be alright?”

Asahina sniffs and rubs her tears on her sleeve. “Yeah, I’m totally fine!

Kirigiri hesitates, “I can stay if you need. Surely they can handle—”

“No, no, don’t— please! I’m good, promise! See!” Asahina smiles widely.

Kirigiri sighs, “I’ll have my phone.”

Asahina translates that as Kirigiri for, ‘*Call me if you need someone to talk to*’ and nods. “I have a report to work on, so I’ll be fine!”


Kirigiri leaves, and Asahina pulls out her laptop to work on her paperwork. But her mind she won’t focus. Her fingers tap mindlessly just below the keyboard as her thoughts race.

A way to honor them.

Kirigiri’s words echo in her head. Usually, the dead get proper graves. Headstones to rest flowers on....

Flowers. That’s perfect. But she doesn’t just want to leave flowers on the site. Flowers are alright and all, but they always end up dying. And the last thing that place needs is more death.

Planting flowers would be better. She’s never been all that good at poetry or symbolism or any of the stuff they learned in literature classes; she was always



too busy thinking about swimming and doughnuts, but she knows that would be a good way to honor Sakura. Something that grows instead of dies—a rarity in this post-Tragedy world.

Having something to do is so much better than paperwork. Asahina always feels better when she's in motion. She might not get the chance to swim anymore, but being out doing anything feels way better than being cramped up in some enclosed space with only her thoughts to keep her company. She has a mission now. A way to honor Sakura and her other fallen classmates.

There weren't many stores open anymore, and most that were still standing were a hodgepodge of whatever survived the riots and destruction. The first store got her nothing but weird looks from the owners. One even remarked about how pointless buying flower seeds was in a time like this and that she should grow something *useful* like vegetables or rice.

Asahina only mutters, "*It's not pointless,*" as she walks out and heads to the next place, carefully navigating the torn-up sidewalk and larger debris that hadn't been cleaned yet. If a world like this can have donuts, then it can surely have flower seeds to plant.

She'll go to a third store if she has to! A hundred stores if needed. Thankfully, it doesn't go that far because she finds a beaten-up packet of seeds in the fifth store she enters. The paper package says *Asagao*. There are faded images of bright purple and blue blooms. It's not like she has any other option because she sees no more flowers. These seem pretty enough.

A gruff old man with glasses is manning the register when she holds up all the packages she's found.

"Flower seeds?" The worker raises a scraggly brow, "Not many people buy those anymore."

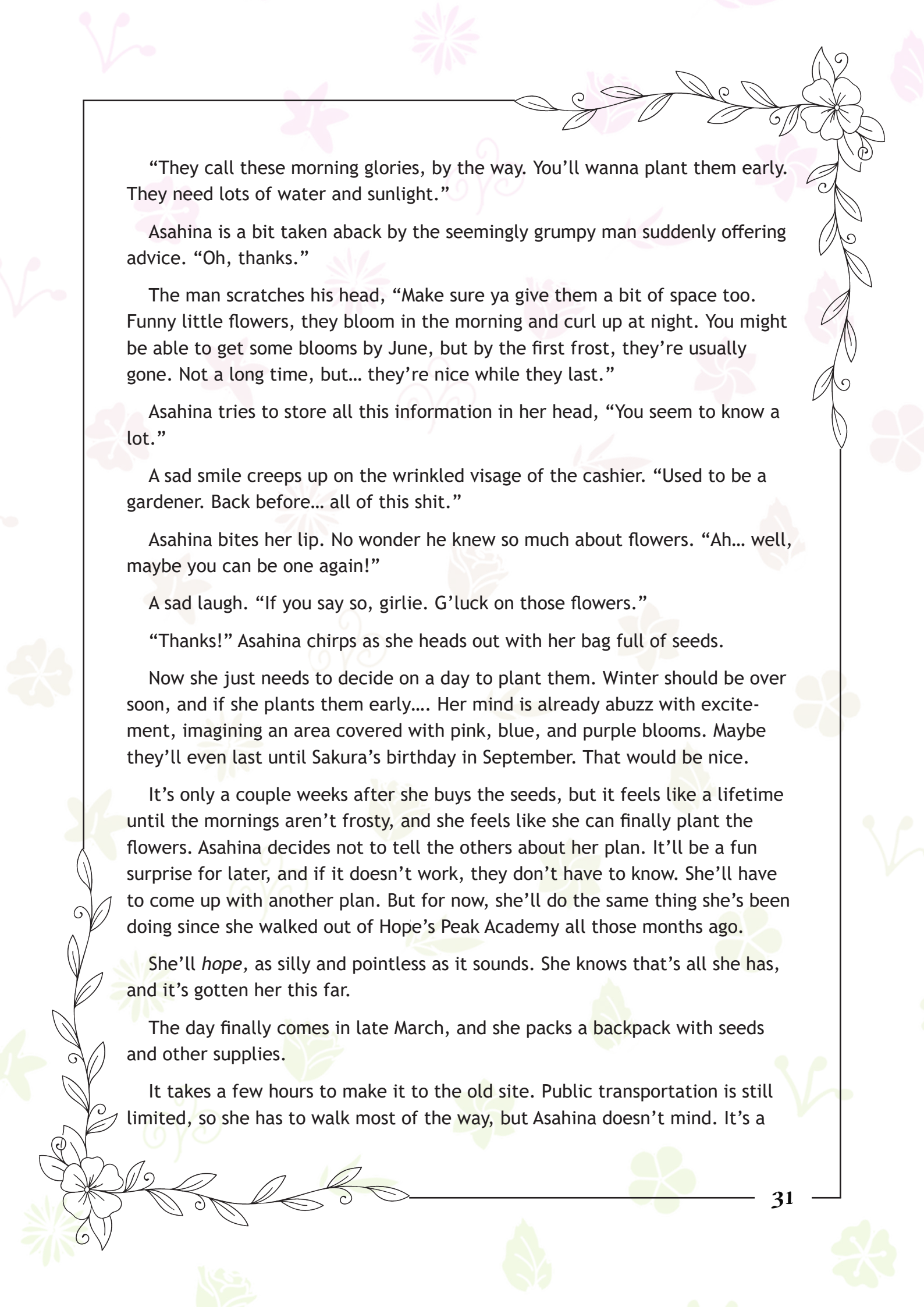
"Yeah. Well. I am!"

The man seems unconcerned by her outburst, letting out a languid sigh, "Fine, fine."

"Are these the only types you have?"

He starts putting all of her packets into a bag. "Of flowers? If that's all that was out, that's all I got."

"Oh, okay."



“They call these morning glories, by the way. You’ll wanna plant them early. They need lots of water and sunlight.”

Asahina is a bit taken aback by the seemingly grumpy man suddenly offering advice. “Oh, thanks.”

The man scratches his head, “Make sure ya give them a bit of space too. Funny little flowers, they bloom in the morning and curl up at night. You might be able to get some blooms by June, but by the first frost, they’re usually gone. Not a long time, but... they’re nice while they last.”

Asahina tries to store all this information in her head, “You seem to know a lot.”

A sad smile creeps up on the wrinkled visage of the cashier. “Used to be a gardener. Back before... all of this shit.”

Asahina bites her lip. No wonder he knew so much about flowers. “Ah... well, maybe you can be one again!”

A sad laugh. “If you say so, girlie. G’luck on those flowers.”

“Thanks!” Asahina chirps as she heads out with her bag full of seeds.

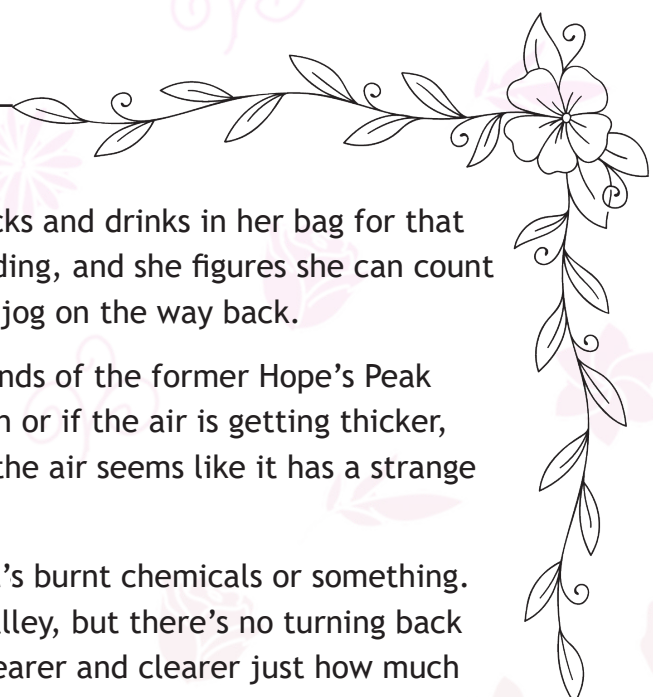
Now she just needs to decide on a day to plant them. Winter should be over soon, and if she plants them early.... Her mind is already abuzz with excitement, imagining an area covered with pink, blue, and purple blooms. Maybe they’ll even last until Sakura’s birthday in September. That would be nice.

It’s only a couple weeks after she buys the seeds, but it feels like a lifetime until the mornings aren’t frosty, and she feels like she can finally plant the flowers. Asahina decides not to tell the others about her plan. It’ll be a fun surprise for later, and if it doesn’t work, they don’t have to know. She’ll have to come up with another plan. But for now, she’ll do the same thing she’s been doing since she walked out of Hope’s Peak Academy all those months ago.

She’ll *hope*, as silly and pointless as it sounds. She knows that’s all she has, and it’s gotten her this far.

The day finally comes in late March, and she packs a backpack with seeds and other supplies.

It takes a few hours to make it to the old site. Public transportation is still limited, so she has to walk most of the way, but Asahina doesn’t mind. It’s a



good workout, and she brought plenty of snacks and drinks in her bag for that very reason. The burn in her legs feels rewarding, and she figures she can count this adventure as training. Maybe she'll even jog on the way back.

Her pace slows as she approaches the grounds of the former Hope's Peak Academy. She's not sure if it's her imagination or if the air is getting thicker, but it feels harder to breathe somehow, and the air seems like it has a strange shimmer to it.

She coughs, and her throat burns. Maybe it's burnt chemicals or something. That sort of brainy stuff is more up Kirigiri's alley, but there's no turning back now, even if, as she gets closer and it gets clearer and clearer just how much the fire destroyed.

The whole area that used to be the Hope's Peak campus is sequestered off and guarded, but it's easier for her to get past the makeshift gates. Everyone knows her. Of course, they do, and not just because she has her Future Foundation badge, but because they all saw the killing game. They all saw her at her lowest, her worst. She hates the way they look at her because she isn't sure if it's pity or judgment. And she's not really sure which she prefers.

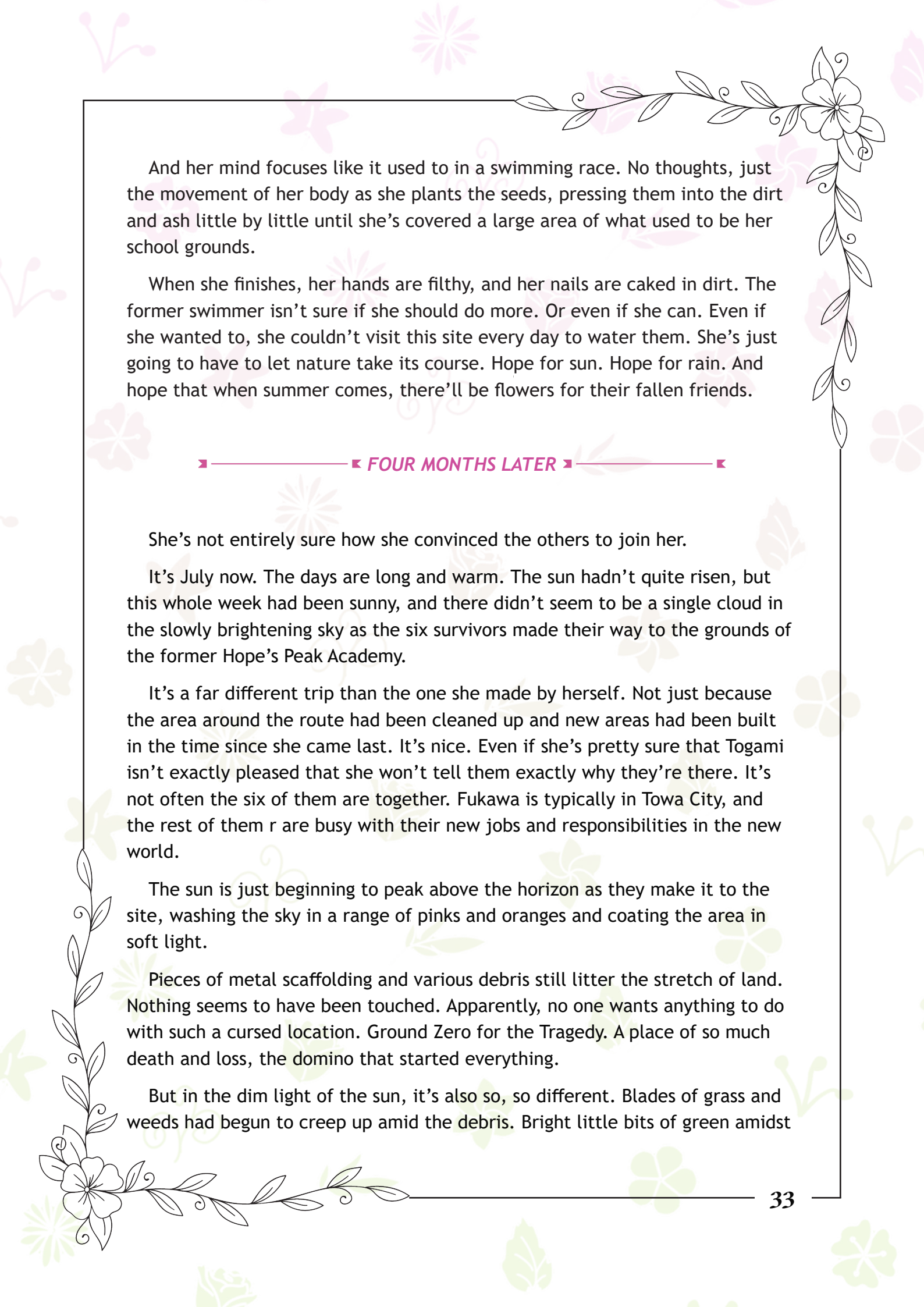
No. Asahina can't let herself think that way. Sakura wouldn't have wanted that. Sakura was strong, even when everyone thought the worst of her. So Asahina would be strong. She would confidently walk into the absolute wreckage that was once the place the two of them created memories together. Memories that may have been robbed from her then but now she held dear, the halcyon high school days when she could spend time with Sakura and not worry about death games and destruction.

It's hard to keep her footing amidst the piles of debris and ash. She almost trips several times, something that could easily get her impaled or injured by some sharp metal piece. But she won't let that stop her.

She makes it to an area she's pretty sure used to surround the old school building. It's hard to tell with everything destroyed, but it *feels* right.

Her hands shake as she tries to open the first packet of seeds. It's a struggle, but she manages. A couple fall to the ground, but it's okay. That's where they're going, anyhow.

The air still feels thick, but she takes a deep breath. *She is doing this for them, for Sakura.*



And her mind focuses like it used to in a swimming race. No thoughts, just the movement of her body as she plants the seeds, pressing them into the dirt and ash little by little until she's covered a large area of what used to be her school grounds.

When she finishes, her hands are filthy, and her nails are caked in dirt. The former swimmer isn't sure if she should do more. Or even if she can. Even if she wanted to, she couldn't visit this site every day to water them. She's just going to have to let nature take its course. Hope for sun. Hope for rain. And hope that when summer comes, there'll be flowers for their fallen friends.

❖ ————— ❖ *FOUR MONTHS LATER* ❖ ————— ❖

She's not entirely sure how she convinced the others to join her.

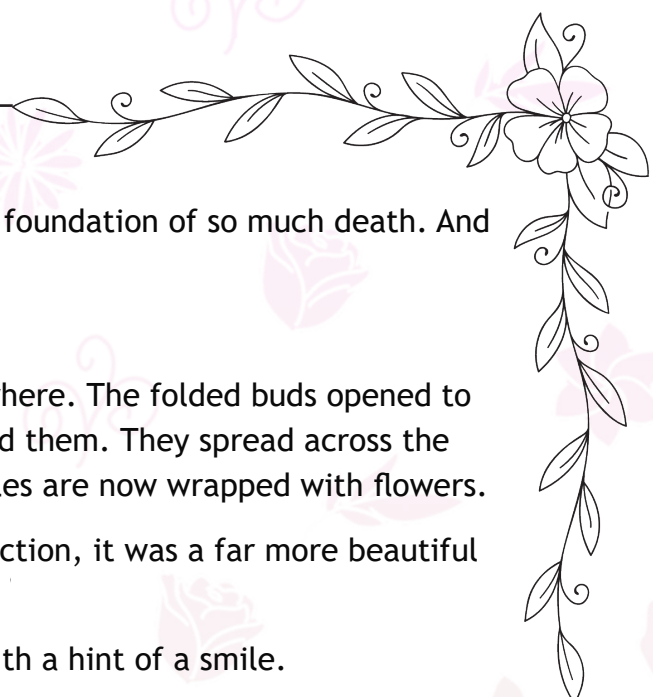
It's July now. The days are long and warm. The sun hadn't quite risen, but this whole week had been sunny, and there didn't seem to be a single cloud in the slowly brightening sky as the six survivors made their way to the grounds of the former Hope's Peak Academy.

It's a far different trip than the one she made by herself. Not just because the area around the route had been cleaned up and new areas had been built in the time since she came last. It's nice. Even if she's pretty sure that Togami isn't exactly pleased that she won't tell them exactly why they're there. It's not often the six of them are together. Fukawa is typically in Towa City, and the rest of them are busy with their new jobs and responsibilities in the new world.

The sun is just beginning to peak above the horizon as they make it to the site, washing the sky in a range of pinks and oranges and coating the area in soft light.

Pieces of metal scaffolding and various debris still litter the stretch of land. Nothing seems to have been touched. Apparently, no one wants anything to do with such a cursed location. Ground Zero for the Tragedy. A place of so much death and loss, the domino that started everything.

But in the dim light of the sun, it's also so, so different. Blades of grass and weeds had begun to creep up amid the debris. Bright little bits of green amidst



the brown and gray. Tiny bits of life from the foundation of so much death. And among them....

Flowers.

Blue and purple and pink. They are everywhere. The folded buds opened to greet the morning sun from where she planted them. They spread across the landscape, claiming it as their own. Metal poles are now wrapped with flowers.

Even if it was still clearly a place of destruction, it was a far more beautiful one now.

“So this was your plan,” Kirigiri remarks with a hint of a smile.

Naegi seems much more surprised than the detective, “You did this, Asahina-san?”

“Such sentimentality,” Togami scoffs, pushing up his glasses as he looks around.

Fukawa mutters, “B-bet you were all dirty and gross doing it.”

Hagakure chuckles, “Kinda cool though, Asahina-cchi”

“I like it.” Naegi smiles brightly at her, and she feels a familiar gloved hand on her shoulder.

“Of course *you* do, but perhaps it isn’t a complete waste of time,” Togami adds, looking over at Naegi, and she’s pretty sure it’s the nicest thing he has ever said and will probably ever say to her.

“Y-yeah, it’s not too bad....” She’s not so sure if Fukawa means it or is just echoing Togami, but her expression seems oddly sincere enough, as if the time with Komaru really had softened her up.

“Been a while since we were all here, huh?” Naegi says, and they fall silent.

It’s not silence full of sadness or despair, though. Asahina has felt that feeling enough to know what it feels like, that heavy, awful feeling. No. This felt... *Nice.*

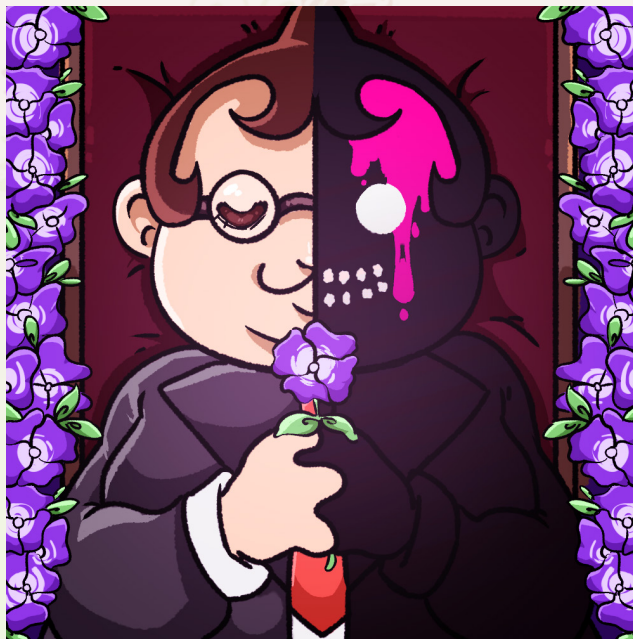
Thank you, Sakura..., for helping make me strong.

After some time, the group finally turns and leaves, all feeling lighter than when they came. Despite the tears streaming down her cheeks, the smile on Asahina’s face was as bright as the sun’s rays beating down on them.



Icons

By Oli









Deathly Positive

By Dillas

One day.

Rome fell in one day.

Sonia believes she could keep her kingdom—her *friends*—together longer than that. All she needs is a good attitude, hope, and perseverance. Stay calm like she did during princess training at home. If she could do all of that, her friends would stick together.

So she picks up Teruteru's work. She cooks. She serves. Things she was taught not to do as a princess. But if she is to lead her people, she must be like them. That has been her mindset as she observed her parents rule. While they are kind and gracious leaders, they do not know their own people.

Sonia vowed to change that under her reign. That goes for any circumstance where she may take up a leadership role, including a killing game.

(And maybe taking up a job like Teruteru will help her fit in more, feel *normal* for once.)

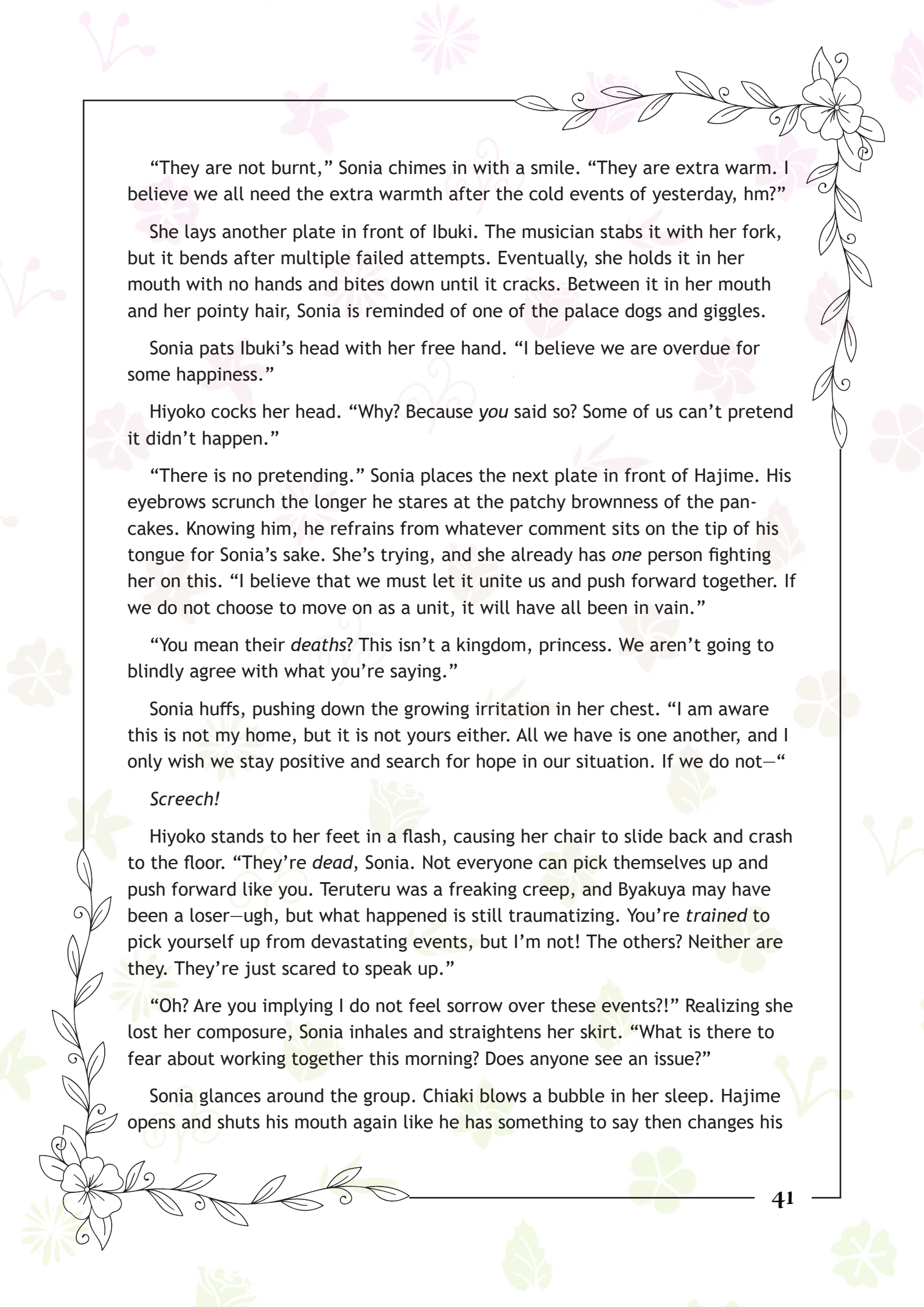
"Being served by a princess, wow. Am I supposed to feel honored and special?"

Sonia ignores the Hiyoko's chirping because the last thing she needs is negativity clouding her mind. She stays light on her feet as she spins around to the table behind her. The plate of steaming pancakes lands in front of Chiaki, who nods in acknowledgement despite her sleepy state.

Kazuichi slams his hands on the table, somehow not startling Chiaki wide awake. "Miss Sonia, let me serve instead! You should be the one sitting."

"Kazuichi, dude, shut up and leave her be." Akane smirks. "I'm ready for some 'cakes.'"

"Um—hello?" Hiyoko snaps her fingers. "They're burnt! Sheesh, even I know how to make pancakes."



“They are not burnt,” Sonia chimes in with a smile. “They are extra warm. I believe we all need the extra warmth after the cold events of yesterday, hm?”

She lays another plate in front of Ibuki. The musician stabs it with her fork, but it bends after multiple failed attempts. Eventually, she holds it in her mouth with no hands and bites down until it cracks. Between it in her mouth and her pointy hair, Sonia is reminded of one of the palace dogs and giggles.

Sonia pats Ibuki’s head with her free hand. “I believe we are overdue for some happiness.”

Hiyoko cocks her head. “Why? Because *you* said so? Some of us can’t pretend it didn’t happen.”

“There is no pretending.” Sonia places the next plate in front of Hajime. His eyebrows scrunch the longer he stares at the patchy brownness of the pancakes. Knowing him, he refrains from whatever comment sits on the tip of his tongue for Sonia’s sake. She’s trying, and she already has *one* person fighting her on this. “I believe that we must let it unite us and push forward together. If we do not choose to move on as a unit, it will have all been in vain.”

“You mean their *deaths*? This isn’t a kingdom, princess. We aren’t going to blindly agree with what you’re saying.”

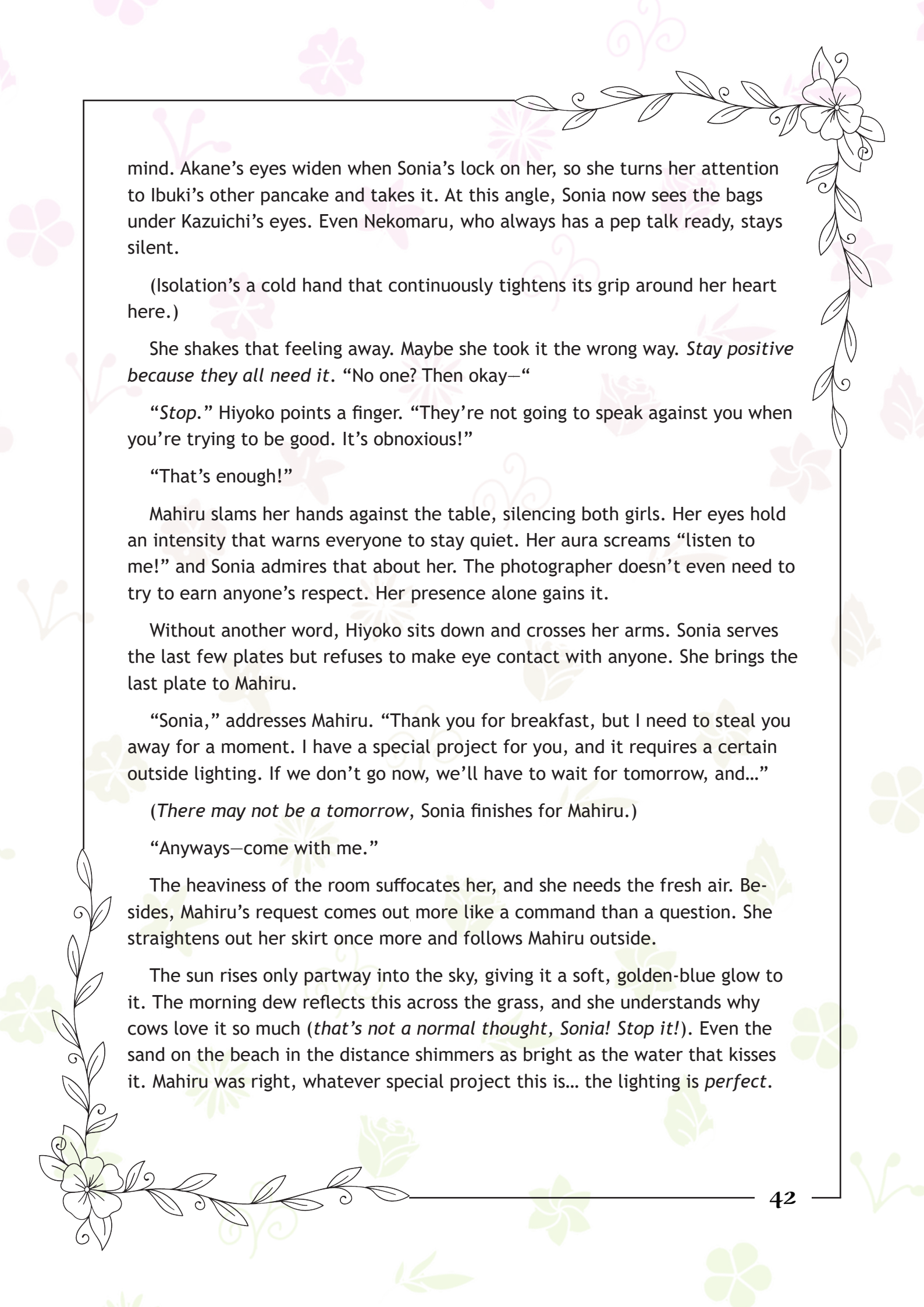
Sonia huffs, pushing down the growing irritation in her chest. “I am aware this is not my home, but it is not yours either. All we have is one another, and I only wish we stay positive and search for hope in our situation. If we do not—“

Screech!

Hiyoko stands to her feet in a flash, causing her chair to slide back and crash to the floor. “They’re *dead*, Sonia. Not everyone can pick themselves up and push forward like you. Teruteru was a freaking creep, and Byakuya may have been a loser—ugh, but what happened is still traumatizing. You’re *trained* to pick yourself up from devastating events, but I’m not! The others? Neither are they. They’re just scared to speak up.”

“Oh? Are you implying I do not feel sorrow over these events?!” Realizing she lost her composure, Sonia inhales and straightens her skirt. “What is there to fear about working together this morning? Does anyone see an issue?”

Sonia glances around the group. Chiaki blows a bubble in her sleep. Hajime opens and shuts his mouth again like he has something to say then changes his



mind. Akane's eyes widen when Sonia's lock on her, so she turns her attention to Ibuki's other pancake and takes it. At this angle, Sonia now sees the bags under Kazuichi's eyes. Even Nekomaru, who always has a pep talk ready, stays silent.

(Isolation's a cold hand that continuously tightens its grip around her heart here.)

She shakes that feeling away. Maybe she took it the wrong way. *Stay positive because they all need it.* "No one? Then okay—"

"Stop." Hiyoko points a finger. "They're not going to speak against you when you're trying to be good. It's obnoxious!"

"That's enough!"

Mahiru slams her hands against the table, silencing both girls. Her eyes hold an intensity that warns everyone to stay quiet. Her aura screams "listen to me!" and Sonia admires that about her. The photographer doesn't even need to try to earn anyone's respect. Her presence alone gains it.

Without another word, Hiyoko sits down and crosses her arms. Sonia serves the last few plates but refuses to make eye contact with anyone. She brings the last plate to Mahiru.

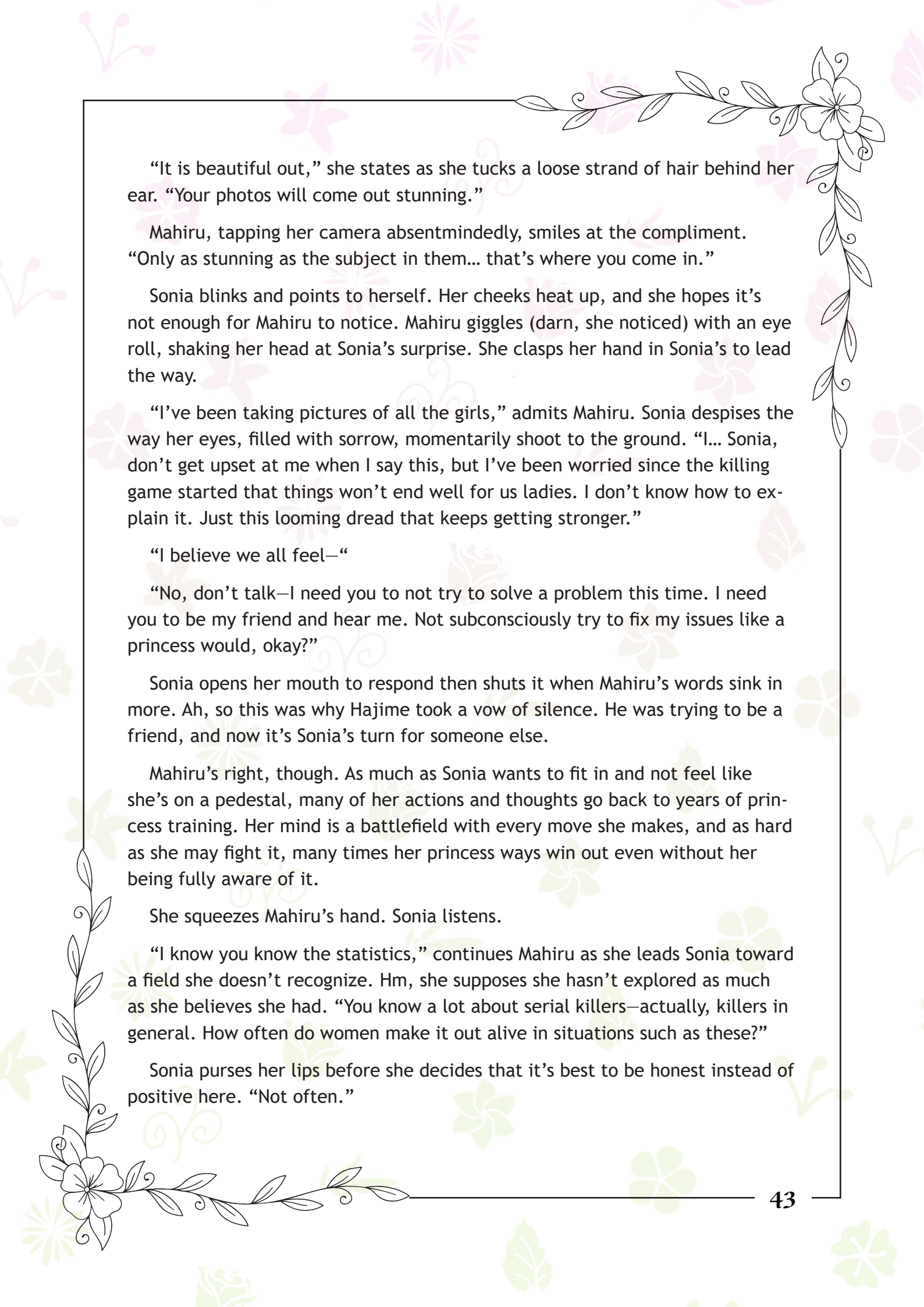
"Sonia," addresses Mahiru. "Thank you for breakfast, but I need to steal you away for a moment. I have a special project for you, and it requires a certain outside lighting. If we don't go now, we'll have to wait for tomorrow, and..."

(*There may not be a tomorrow*, Sonia finishes for Mahiru.)

"Anyways—come with me."

The heaviness of the room suffocates her, and she needs the fresh air. Besides, Mahiru's request comes out more like a command than a question. She straightens out her skirt once more and follows Mahiru outside.

The sun rises only partway into the sky, giving it a soft, golden-blue glow to it. The morning dew reflects this across the grass, and she understands why cows love it so much (*that's not a normal thought, Sonia! Stop it!*). Even the sand on the beach in the distance shimmers as bright as the water that kisses it. Mahiru was right, whatever special project this is... the lighting is *perfect*.



"It is beautiful out," she states as she tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Your photos will come out stunning."

Mahiru, tapping her camera absentmindedly, smiles at the compliment. "Only as stunning as the subject in them... that's where you come in."

Sonia blinks and points to herself. Her cheeks heat up, and she hopes it's not enough for Mahiru to notice. Mahiru giggles (darn, she noticed) with an eye roll, shaking her head at Sonia's surprise. She clasps her hand in Sonia's to lead the way.

"I've been taking pictures of all the girls," admits Mahiru. Sonia despises the way her eyes, filled with sorrow, momentarily shoot to the ground. "I... Sonia, don't get upset at me when I say this, but I've been worried since the killing game started that things won't end well for us ladies. I don't know how to explain it. Just this looming dread that keeps getting stronger."

"I believe we all feel—"

"No, don't talk—I need you to not try to solve a problem this time. I need you to be my friend and hear me. Not subconsciously try to fix my issues like a princess would, okay?"

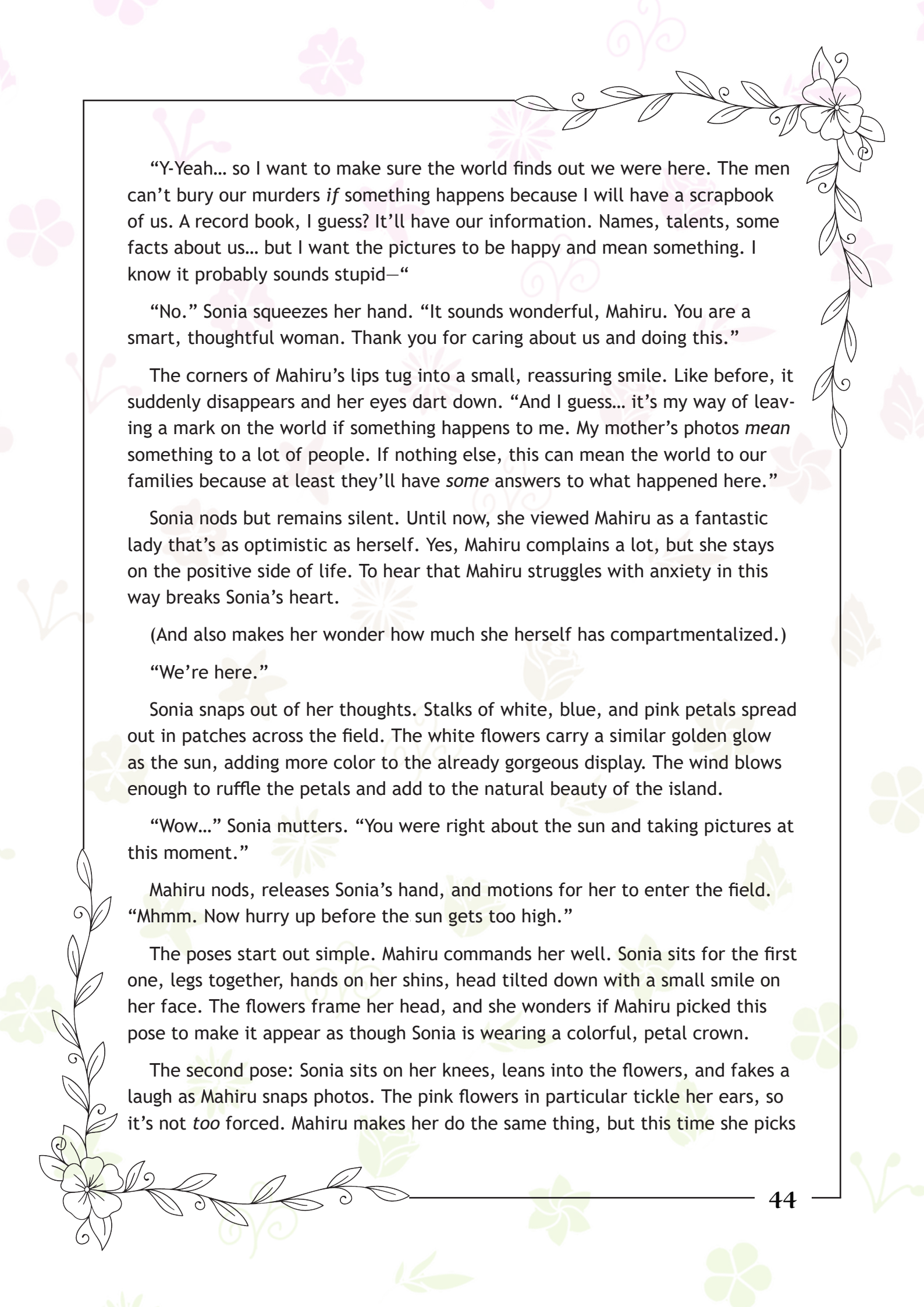
Sonia opens her mouth to respond then shuts it when Mahiru's words sink in more. Ah, so this was why Hajime took a vow of silence. He was trying to be a friend, and now it's Sonia's turn for someone else.

Mahiru's right, though. As much as Sonia wants to fit in and not feel like she's on a pedestal, many of her actions and thoughts go back to years of princess training. Her mind is a battlefield with every move she makes, and as hard as she may fight it, many times her princess ways win out even without her being fully aware of it.

She squeezes Mahiru's hand. Sonia listens.

"I know you know the statistics," continues Mahiru as she leads Sonia toward a field she doesn't recognize. Hm, she supposes she hasn't explored as much as she believes she had. "You know a lot about serial killers—actually, killers in general. How often do women make it out alive in situations such as these?"

Sonia purses her lips before she decides that it's best to be honest instead of positive here. "Not often."



“Y-Yeah... so I want to make sure the world finds out we were here. The men can’t bury our murders *if* something happens because I will have a scrapbook of us. A record book, I guess? It’ll have our information. Names, talents, some facts about us... but I want the pictures to be happy and mean something. I know it probably sounds stupid—“

“No.” Sonia squeezes her hand. “It sounds wonderful, Mahiru. You are a smart, thoughtful woman. Thank you for caring about us and doing this.”

The corners of Mahiru’s lips tug into a small, reassuring smile. Like before, it suddenly disappears and her eyes dart down. “And I guess... it’s my way of leaving a mark on the world if something happens to me. My mother’s photos *mean* something to a lot of people. If nothing else, this can mean the world to our families because at least they’ll have *some* answers to what happened here.”

Sonia nods but remains silent. Until now, she viewed Mahiru as a fantastic lady that’s as optimistic as herself. Yes, Mahiru complains a lot, but she stays on the positive side of life. To hear that Mahiru struggles with anxiety in this way breaks Sonia’s heart.

(And also makes her wonder how much she herself has compartmentalized.)

“We’re here.”

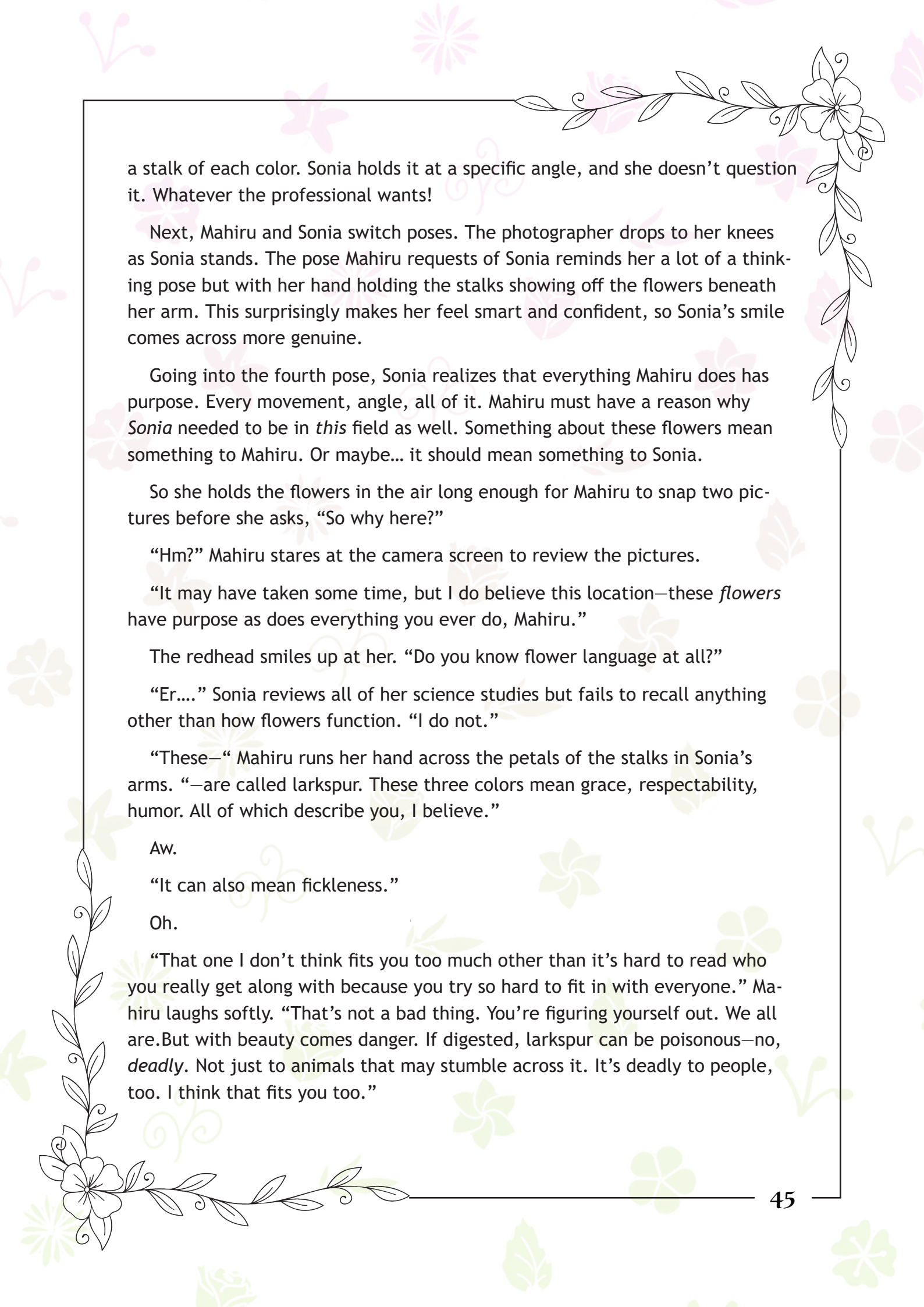
Sonia snaps out of her thoughts. Stalks of white, blue, and pink petals spread out in patches across the field. The white flowers carry a similar golden glow as the sun, adding more color to the already gorgeous display. The wind blows enough to ruffle the petals and add to the natural beauty of the island.

“Wow...” Sonia mutters. “You were right about the sun and taking pictures at this moment.”

Mahiru nods, releases Sonia’s hand, and motions for her to enter the field. “Mhmm. Now hurry up before the sun gets too high.”

The poses start out simple. Mahiru commands her well. Sonia sits for the first one, legs together, hands on her shins, head tilted down with a small smile on her face. The flowers frame her head, and she wonders if Mahiru picked this pose to make it appear as though Sonia is wearing a colorful, petal crown.

The second pose: Sonia sits on her knees, leans into the flowers, and fakes a laugh as Mahiru snaps photos. The pink flowers in particular tickle her ears, so it’s not *too* forced. Mahiru makes her do the same thing, but this time she picks



a stalk of each color. Sonia holds it at a specific angle, and she doesn't question it. Whatever the professional wants!

Next, Mahiru and Sonia switch poses. The photographer drops to her knees as Sonia stands. The pose Mahiru requests of Sonia reminds her a lot of a thinking pose but with her hand holding the stalks showing off the flowers beneath her arm. This surprisingly makes her feel smart and confident, so Sonia's smile comes across more genuine.

Going into the fourth pose, Sonia realizes that everything Mahiru does has purpose. Every movement, angle, all of it. Mahiru must have a reason why *Sonia* needed to be in *this* field as well. Something about these flowers mean something to Mahiru. Or maybe... it should mean something to Sonia.

So she holds the flowers in the air long enough for Mahiru to snap two pictures before she asks, "So why here?"

"Hm?" Mahiru stares at the camera screen to review the pictures.

"It may have taken some time, but I do believe this location—these *flowers* have purpose as does everything you ever do, Mahiru."

The redhead smiles up at her. "Do you know flower language at all?"

"Er...." Sonia reviews all of her science studies but fails to recall anything other than how flowers function. "I do not."

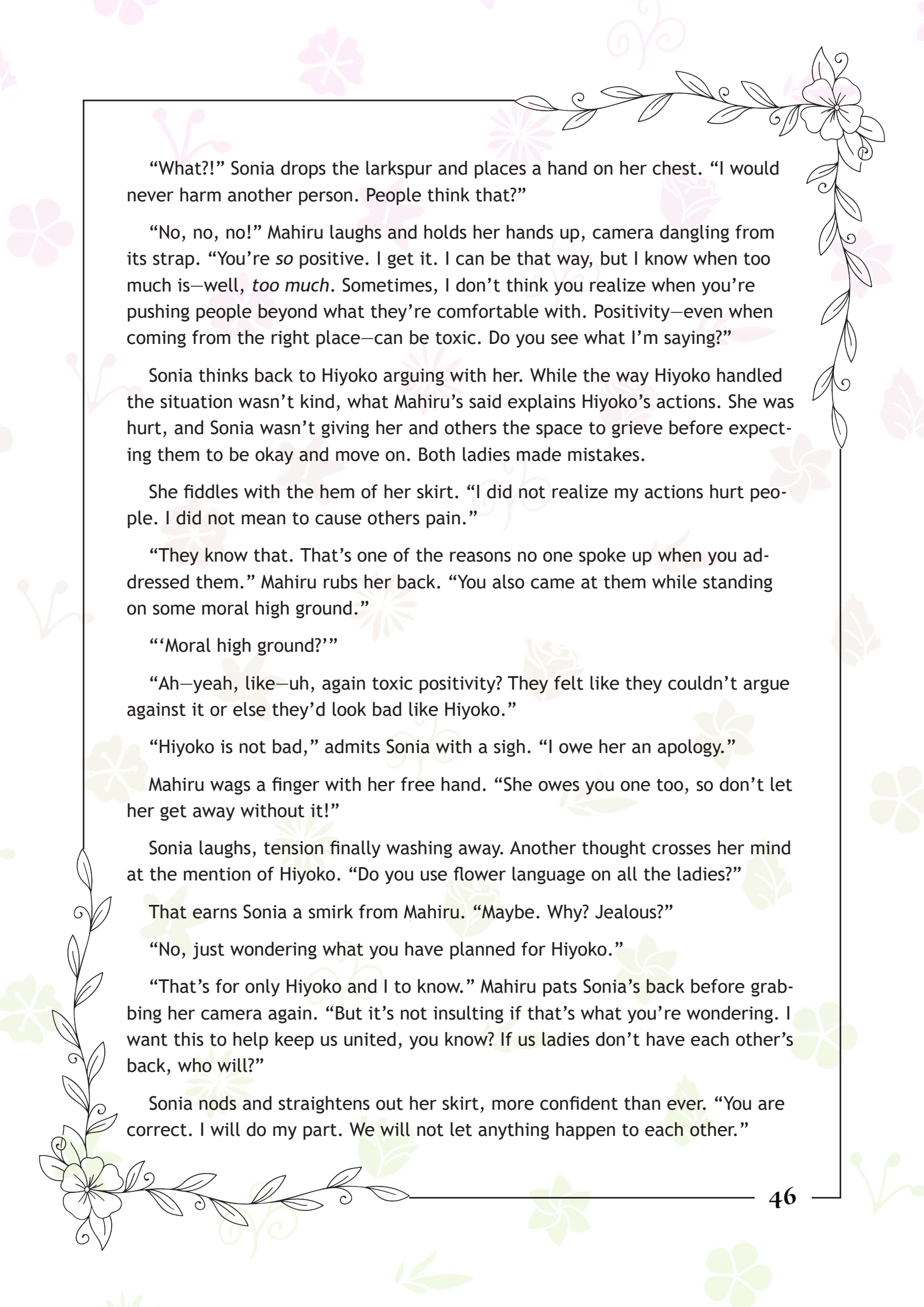
"These—" Mahiru runs her hand across the petals of the stalks in Sonia's arms. "—are called larkspur. These three colors mean grace, respectability, humor. All of which describe you, I believe."

Aw.

"It can also mean fickleness."

Oh.

"That one I don't think fits you too much other than it's hard to read who you really get along with because you try so hard to fit in with everyone." Mahiru laughs softly. "That's not a bad thing. You're figuring yourself out. We all are. But with beauty comes danger. If digested, larkspur can be poisonous—no, *deadly*. Not just to animals that may stumble across it. It's deadly to people, too. I think that fits you too."



“What?!” Sonia drops the larkspur and places a hand on her chest. “I would never harm another person. People think that?”

“No, no, no!” Mahiru laughs and holds her hands up, camera dangling from its strap. “You’re so positive. I get it. I can be that way, but I know when too much is—well, *too much*. Sometimes, I don’t think you realize when you’re pushing people beyond what they’re comfortable with. Positivity—even when coming from the right place—can be toxic. Do you see what I’m saying?”

Sonia thinks back to Hiyoko arguing with her. While the way Hiyoko handled the situation wasn’t kind, what Mahiru’s said explains Hiyoko’s actions. She was hurt, and Sonia wasn’t giving her and others the space to grieve before expecting them to be okay and move on. Both ladies made mistakes.

She fiddles with the hem of her skirt. “I did not realize my actions hurt people. I did not mean to cause others pain.”

“They know that. That’s one of the reasons no one spoke up when you addressed them.” Mahiru rubs her back. “You also came at them while standing on some moral high ground.”

“Moral high ground?”

“Ah—yeah, like—uh, again toxic positivity? They felt like they couldn’t argue against it or else they’d look bad like Hiyoko.”

“Hiyoko is not bad,” admits Sonia with a sigh. “I owe her an apology.”

Mahiru wags a finger with her free hand. “She owes you one too, so don’t let her get away without it!”

Sonia laughs, tension finally washing away. Another thought crosses her mind at the mention of Hiyoko. “Do you use flower language on all the ladies?”

That earns Sonia a smirk from Mahiru. “Maybe. Why? Jealous?”

“No, just wondering what you have planned for Hiyoko.”

“That’s for only Hiyoko and I to know.” Mahiru pats Sonia’s back before grabbing her camera again. “But it’s not insulting if that’s what you’re wondering. I want this to help keep us united, you know? If us ladies don’t have each other’s back, who will?”

Sonia nods and straightens out her skirt, more confident than ever. “You are correct. I will do my part. We will not let anything happen to each other.”

“Glad to hear—“

Sonia wraps Mahiru in a tight hug. Every isolated feeling Sonia felt before shatters the moment Mahiru hugs her back, creating a warm feeling between them. Mahiru lets out a long breath, and Sonia practically feels a bit of anxiety release from her. It makes her feel like a true sisterhood has been formed

Her first real friend that accepts her and sees her for who she is.

“Thank you for telling me the truth,” she whispers in Mahiru’s ear. “I will do better.”

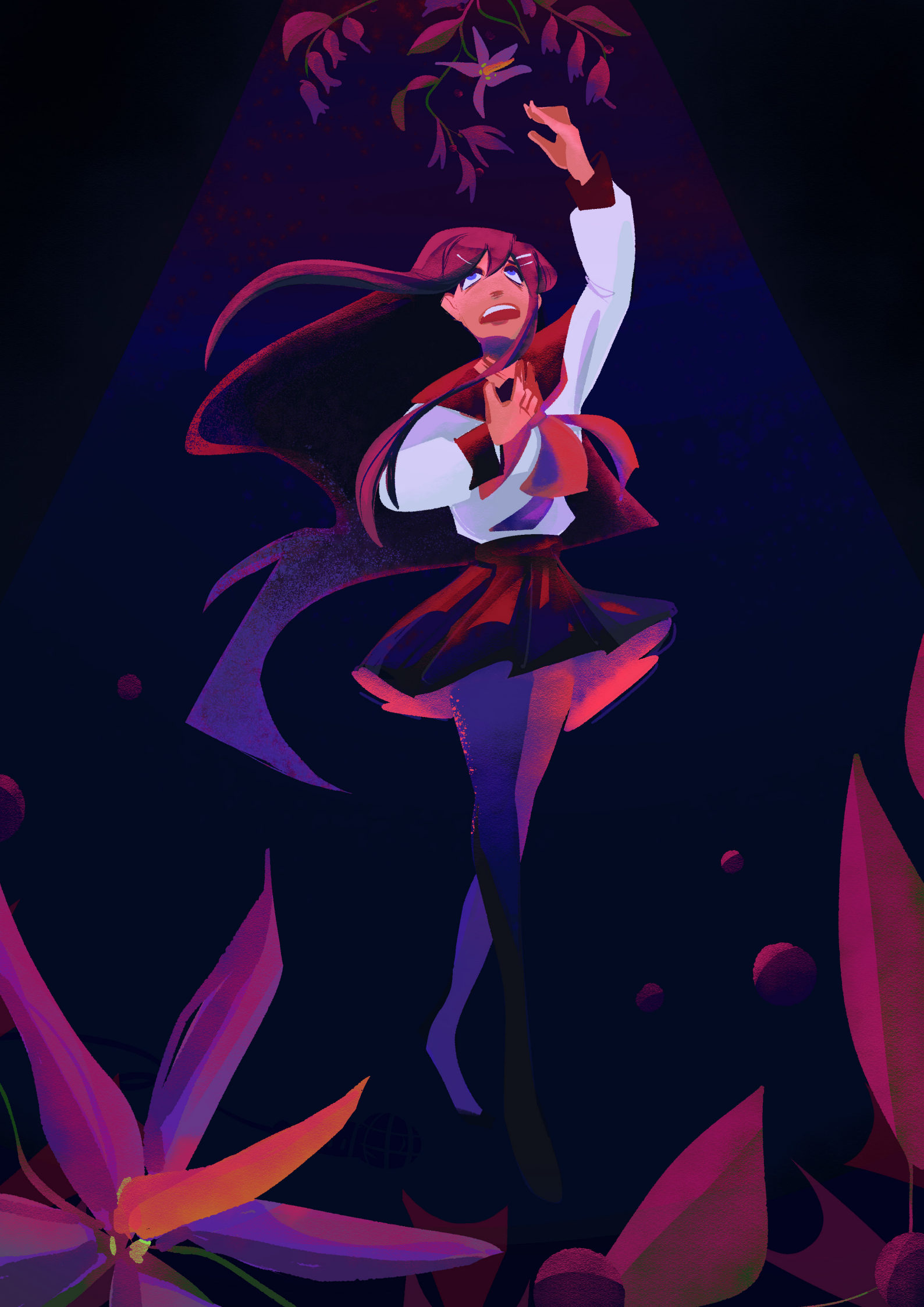
“Y-Yeah... you’re welcome.”

When they break apart, Mahiru’s face is flushed a bright red. Sonia laughs. It’s almost the same shade as her hair.

“A-Anyways! Get back out there! I have a few more poses for you.”











feelings in bloom

By Emi

“What do you think of all this?” Himiko asked softly, reaching a hand into the cage to stroke a dove’s silky feathers. It cooed, nuzzling into her touch, but failed to offer any wisdom that might help her. There was probably no one who could, human or animal. Even her master’s most crushing humiliations had never come close to what she endured just a few short days ago.

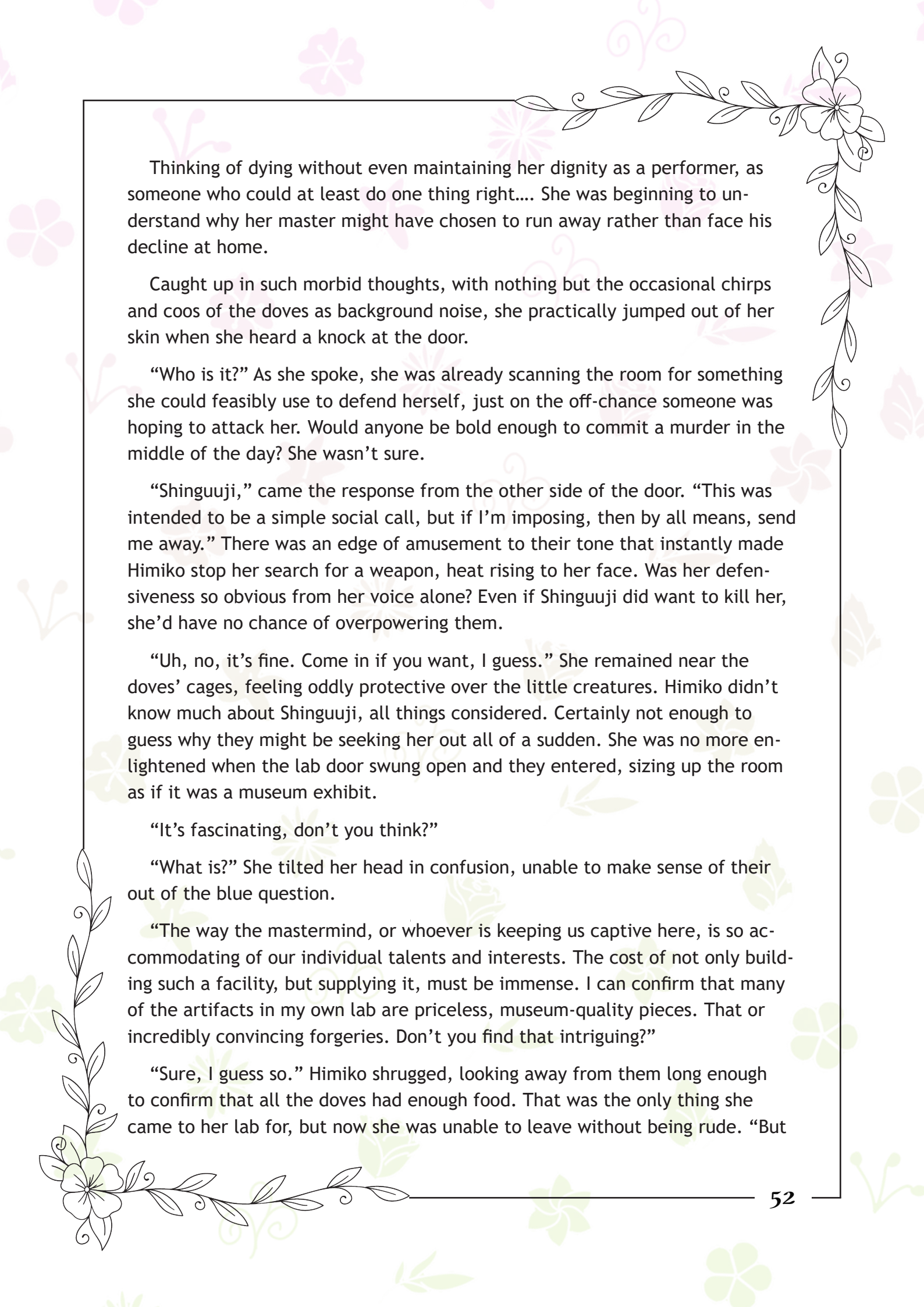
She was a failure as a magician. She had a reputation for being able to lift even the most sour of moods with her performances, something she’d worked harder for than anything else. Not only did she fail to achieve anything resembling her usual success, the tools of her trade were used for murder.

Not only that, she thought, recalling the sight of blood-dyed water and cracked bones, but she’d been forced to break her oath and reveal the secrets behind the underwater escape act. Magic had probably been ruined forever for everyone there.

“Maybe it really would’ve been better if we got the culprit wrong,” she mumbled, doling out bird seed to each member of her loyal audience. “Anyone looking for an easy target is just going to come for me next.” One of the doves pecked impatiently at her hand, pulling a choked laugh out of her.

“Yeah, I’m sure you guys would still get fed one way or another. Someone had to have been taking care of you before this room opened up, right? So... either way, you’d be fine.”

Yes, it would be fine either way. When Himiko looked around at her ultimate research lab, filled with tools and equipment that now sickened her just to think about using, she had little doubt that her eventual fate wouldn’t involve going home and returning to her career. Even Angie, who she considered a friend, didn’t hesitate to turn on her at the merest suggestion that she might be guilty. Few people at the academy respected her, much less had any sort of genuine loyalty or affection for her. The one exception to that might have been Tenko, but that wasn’t the kind of loyalty Himiko was interested in.



Thinking of dying without even maintaining her dignity as a performer, as someone who could at least do one thing right.... She was beginning to understand why her master might have chosen to run away rather than face his decline at home.

Caught up in such morbid thoughts, with nothing but the occasional chirps and coos of the doves as background noise, she practically jumped out of her skin when she heard a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" As she spoke, she was already scanning the room for something she could feasibly use to defend herself, just on the off-chance someone was hoping to attack her. Would anyone be bold enough to commit a murder in the middle of the day? She wasn't sure.

"Shinguuji," came the response from the other side of the door. "This was intended to be a simple social call, but if I'm imposing, then by all means, send me away." There was an edge of amusement to their tone that instantly made Himiko stop her search for a weapon, heat rising to her face. Was her defensiveness so obvious from her voice alone? Even if Shinguuji did want to kill her, she'd have no chance of overpowering them.

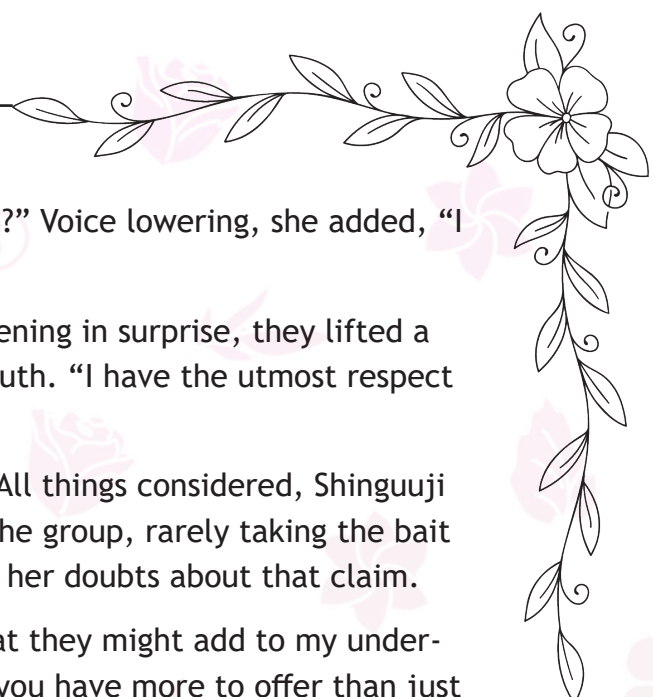
"Uh, no, it's fine. Come in if you want, I guess." She remained near the doves' cages, feeling oddly protective over the little creatures. Himiko didn't know much about Shinguuji, all things considered. Certainly not enough to guess why they might be seeking her out all of a sudden. She was no more enlightened when the lab door swung open and they entered, sizing up the room as if it was a museum exhibit.

"It's fascinating, don't you think?"

"What is?" She tilted her head in confusion, unable to make sense of their out of the blue question.

"The way the mastermind, or whoever is keeping us captive here, is so accommodating of our individual talents and interests. The cost of not only building such a facility, but supplying it, must be immense. I can confirm that many of the artifacts in my own lab are priceless, museum-quality pieces. That or incredibly convincing forgeries. Don't you find that intriguing?"

"Sure, I guess so." Himiko shrugged, looking away from them long enough to confirm that all the doves had enough food. That was the only thing she came to her lab for, but now she was unable to leave without being rude. "But



are you really here just to make conversation?” Voice lowering, she added, “I didn’t think you had much respect for me.”

“Whyever would you think that?” Eyes widening in surprise, they lifted a hand to their face, covering their masked mouth. “I have the utmost respect for everyone here.”

She crossed her arms, raising an eyebrow. All things considered, Shinguuji was one of the least combative members of the group, rarely taking the bait even when others insulted them, but she had her doubts about that claim.

“Alright, alright, almost everyone. For what they might add to my understanding of humanity, if nothing else. I think you have more to offer than just that though, Yumeno-san.” As they spoke, they strolled over to the immense guillotine at one corner of the room, bandaged fingers trailing over the smooth metal side of the blade. Himiko watched their reflection in it, finding that she didn’t like the gleam in their eyes. “Is it so incomprehensible that I might have wished to check up on you? Preoccupied though the others may be, I’ve noticed a change in your demeanor. Still not recovered from the events of the other day, if I had to guess. It’s a shame. You put on a truly lovely show.”

“You’re joking, right?” All she could do was scoff. Was she doomed to keep repeating the same humiliation over and over again? “In what world was it lovely?”

“No, I am not joking. Until it was so rudely interrupted by Toujou-san’s actions, it was...charming. I was very much looking forward to seeing more.” Shinguuji let out an overexaggerated sigh. At first, Himiko found it strange—they didn’t usually seem inclined to dramatics. Well, not unless it was about anthropology or something horribly macabre. When they glanced back at her, though, she realized. They were going to extra effort to convey their emotions as a way of making up for their hidden facial expressions. But... why only with her?

“Yeah, right. You were just as happy to gang up on me with everyone else, don’t pretend like you didn’t join in.”

“The two have nothing to do with each other.” They shrugged, voice flat. “Trials have no place for emotion. They are for finding the culprit by any means necessary. When you no longer seemed suspicious, I told everyone to move on,

did I not? Or would you have had me profess my undying loyalty to you like Chabashira-san? I think your talent is fascinating, truly.”

“Okay, whatever. I’ll believe you for now.” She turned to the doves again, an odd sense of shame knotting up within her. “What’s your point then?”

“I’d like to see more magic, if that’s agreeable to you.”

“You want to see more magic? Are you being serious?” The words slipped out before she could stop them, surely more harsh than they deserved. Yet, rather than getting angry or storming out, Shinguuji looked almost amused. They nodded, not batting an eye.

“I am. Is that alright?”

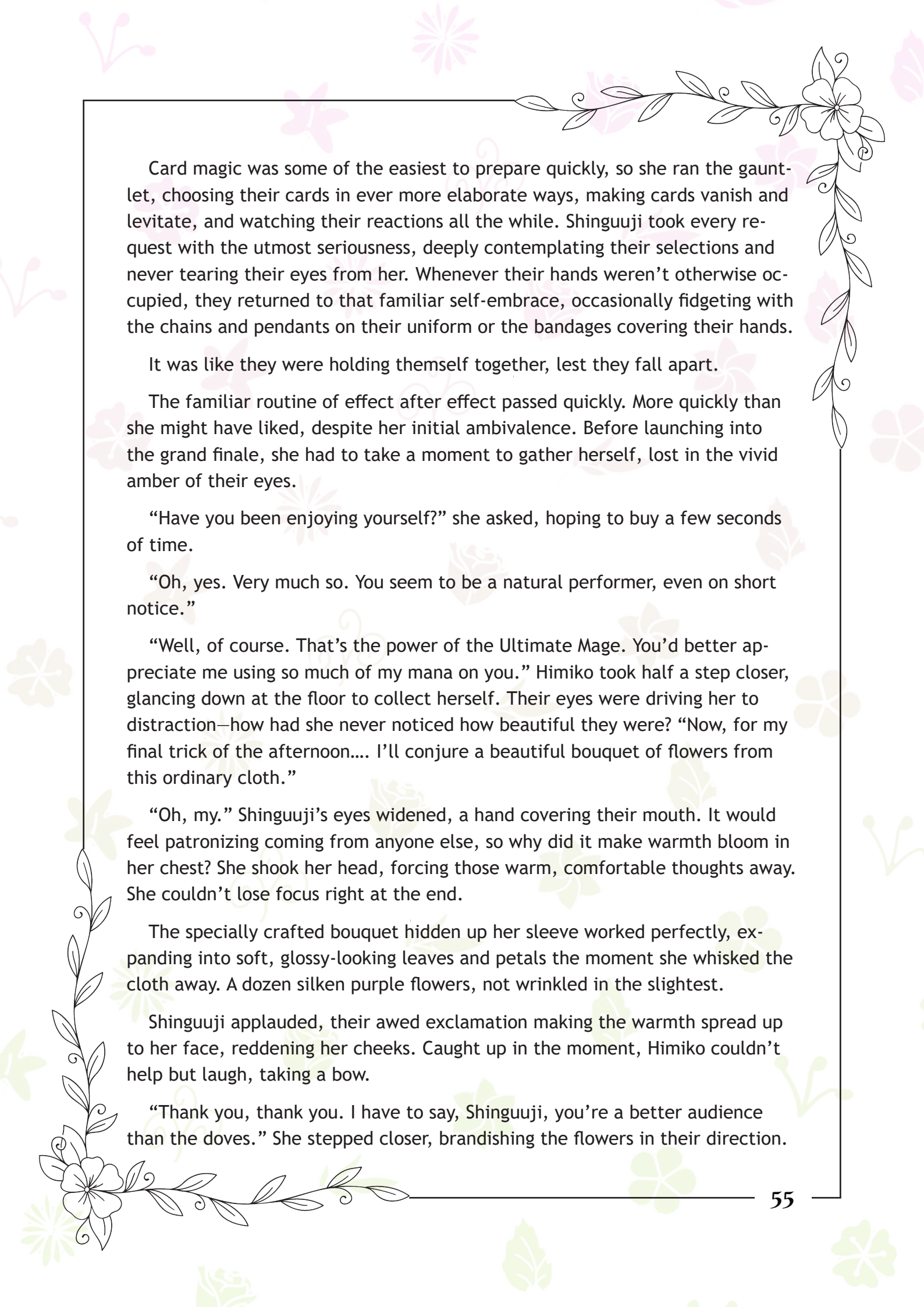
“I... yeah. I guess so. I can show you a few small things—I don’t have enough mana right now for anything too dramatic. But before I show you anything, you have to make a promise. Swear you won’t try to ‘figure out the trick’ or go looking for logic. You have to enjoy it how it’s meant to be enjoyed... as true magic.” Arms crossed again, she watched them, searching for any hint of hesitation or dishonesty. She found none, even when they spoke up again.

“Very well. I promise to set aside all preconceived notions and avoid playing detective. I wish only to observe your talent, Yumeno-san.” A single beat of silence passed, then they offered another exaggerated smile through their mask. “Is that sufficient, or will a blood oath be necessary?”

“Yes, that’s enough.” She bit her lip to stifle a smile of her own, looking away. “Go wait in the hall while I set up. I’ll tell you when you can come back in.”

Himiko had never been a fan of impromptu shows. They made her anxious and never felt as satisfying as something more carefully crafted, not to mention the entitlement of those who seemed to view her as a parlor trick to be trotted out on demand. Shinguuji didn’t give her that impression though. The earnest, almost pleading look in their eyes was stuck in her head, propelling her to get ready as soon as she could.

After welcoming them back inside (they giggled, hugging themselves with all the giddiness of a schoolgirl), she got started, dispensing with all the typical introductory rambling. Their gaze was intent enough without it.



Card magic was some of the easiest to prepare quickly, so she ran the gauntlet, choosing their cards in ever more elaborate ways, making cards vanish and levitate, and watching their reactions all the while. Shinguuji took every request with the utmost seriousness, deeply contemplating their selections and never tearing their eyes from her. Whenever their hands weren't otherwise occupied, they returned to that familiar self-embrace, occasionally fidgeting with the chains and pendants on their uniform or the bandages covering their hands.

It was like they were holding themselves together, lest they fall apart.

The familiar routine of effect after effect passed quickly. More quickly than she might have liked, despite her initial ambivalence. Before launching into the grand finale, she had to take a moment to gather herself, lost in the vivid amber of their eyes.

"Have you been enjoying yourself?" she asked, hoping to buy a few seconds of time.

"Oh, yes. Very much so. You seem to be a natural performer, even on short notice."

"Well, of course. That's the power of the Ultimate Mage. You'd better appreciate me using so much of my mana on you." Himiko took half a step closer, glancing down at the floor to collect herself. Their eyes were driving her to distraction—how had she never noticed how beautiful they were? "Now, for my final trick of the afternoon.... I'll conjure a beautiful bouquet of flowers from this ordinary cloth."

"Oh, my." Shinguuji's eyes widened, a hand covering their mouth. It would feel patronizing coming from anyone else, so why did it make warmth bloom in her chest? She shook her head, forcing those warm, comfortable thoughts away. She couldn't lose focus right at the end.

The specially crafted bouquet hidden up her sleeve worked perfectly, expanding into soft, glossy-looking leaves and petals the moment she whisked the cloth away. A dozen silken purple flowers, not wrinkled in the slightest.

Shinguuji applauded, their awed exclamation making the warmth spread up to her face, reddening her cheeks. Caught up in the moment, Himiko couldn't help but laugh, taking a bow.

"Thank you, thank you. I have to say, Shinguuji, you're a better audience than the doves." She stepped closer, brandishing the flowers in their direction.

“Such a lovely audience deserves a gift to show my appreciation. But these flowers aren’t real, unfortunately. Not that I can’t conjure real ones, of course! It just takes a lot of magical energy to do something like that, and you made me do this show on the spot.”

“I made you do it? I didn’t realize you felt that way.” They leaned back in their chair to survey her, all crossed arms and raised eyebrows.

“Well, no, I didn’t mean...” She growled in frustration, looking away. How could one person be so difficult to talk to, even as their attention made her feel like an entirely new version of herself? “Just let me get you some real flowers. That’s all.”

“That really isn’t necessary, Yumeno-san,” they said softly, an undertone of something pained in their voice. Just as she was about to apologize, wondering how she managed to offend someone so unflappable, they continued in a more pleasant tone. “It isn’t necessary when I did nothing remarkable, but if you insist, how could I decline?”

“Good. There’s loads of flowers in the courtyard; why don’t we go out there?” Sure, she could just find them later after preparing their gift, but she wasn’t quite ready for their time together to end. She knew that a spell would be broken the moment Shinguuji left her sight.

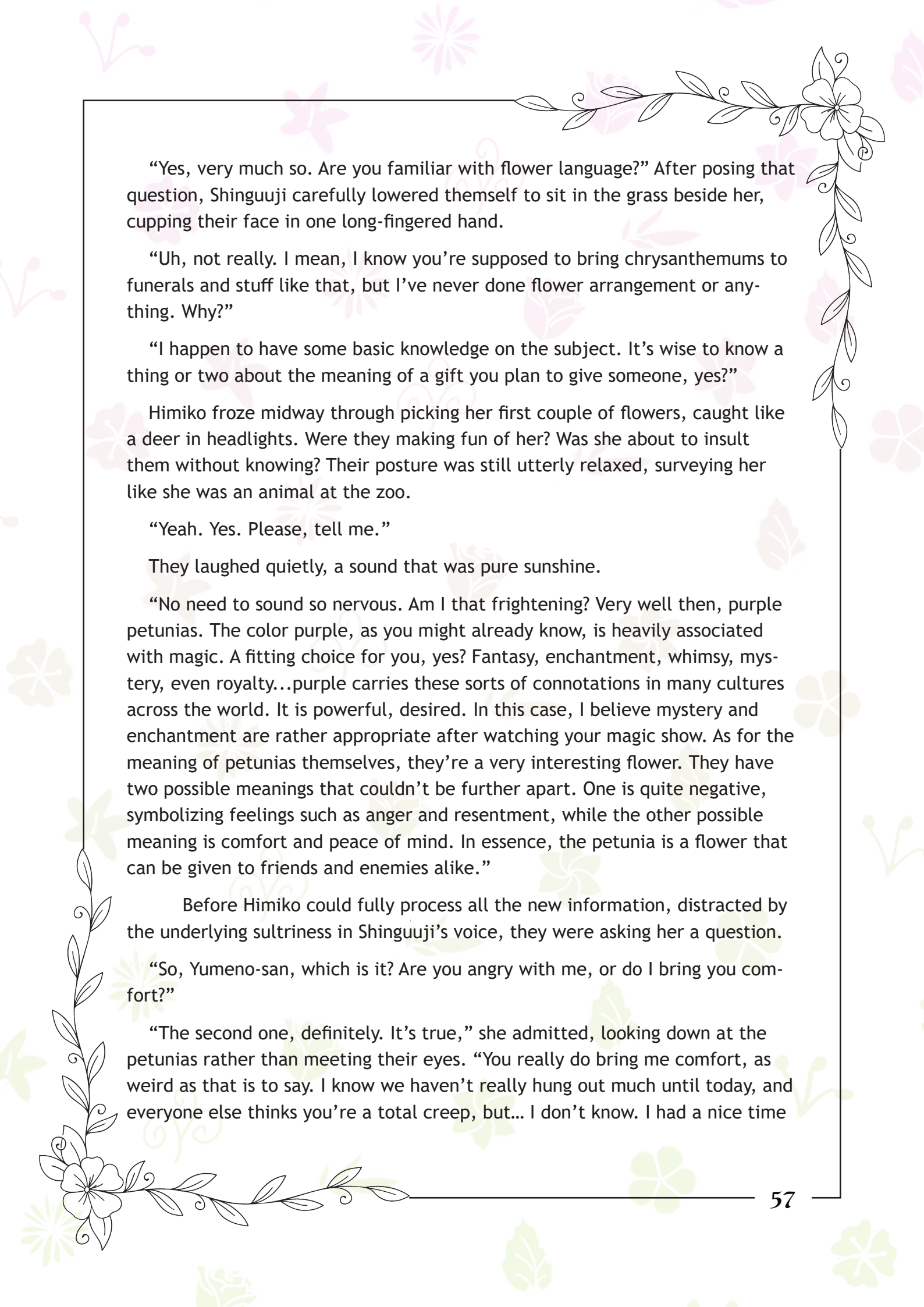
“Certainly. I would be delighted to accompany you.”



The academy’s flower beds hosted a wide variety of blossoms in nearly every shade Himiko could possibly imagine, but she had no trouble deciding what to choose for Shinguuji. It only seemed right to pick the flowers that most resembled the artificial bouquet from her lab. Perhaps then Shinguuji would look at the flowers on their own and smile, remembering this afternoon they spent together. She liked the thought of that—her being on Shinguuji’s mind.

“Petunias, hmm? An interesting choice.”

“Interesting?” she echoed, looking up at them from where she knelt in the grass, carefully inspecting the flowers. “Is it? I just chose them because they look like the other ones.”



“Yes, very much so. Are you familiar with flower language?” After posing that question, Shinguuji carefully lowered themselves to sit in the grass beside her, cupping their face in one long-fingered hand.

“Uh, not really. I mean, I know you’re supposed to bring chrysanthemums to funerals and stuff like that, but I’ve never done flower arrangement or anything. Why?”

“I happen to have some basic knowledge on the subject. It’s wise to know a thing or two about the meaning of a gift you plan to give someone, yes?”

Himiko froze midway through picking her first couple of flowers, caught like a deer in headlights. Were they making fun of her? Was she about to insult them without knowing? Their posture was still utterly relaxed, surveying her like she was an animal at the zoo.

“Yeah. Yes. Please, tell me.”

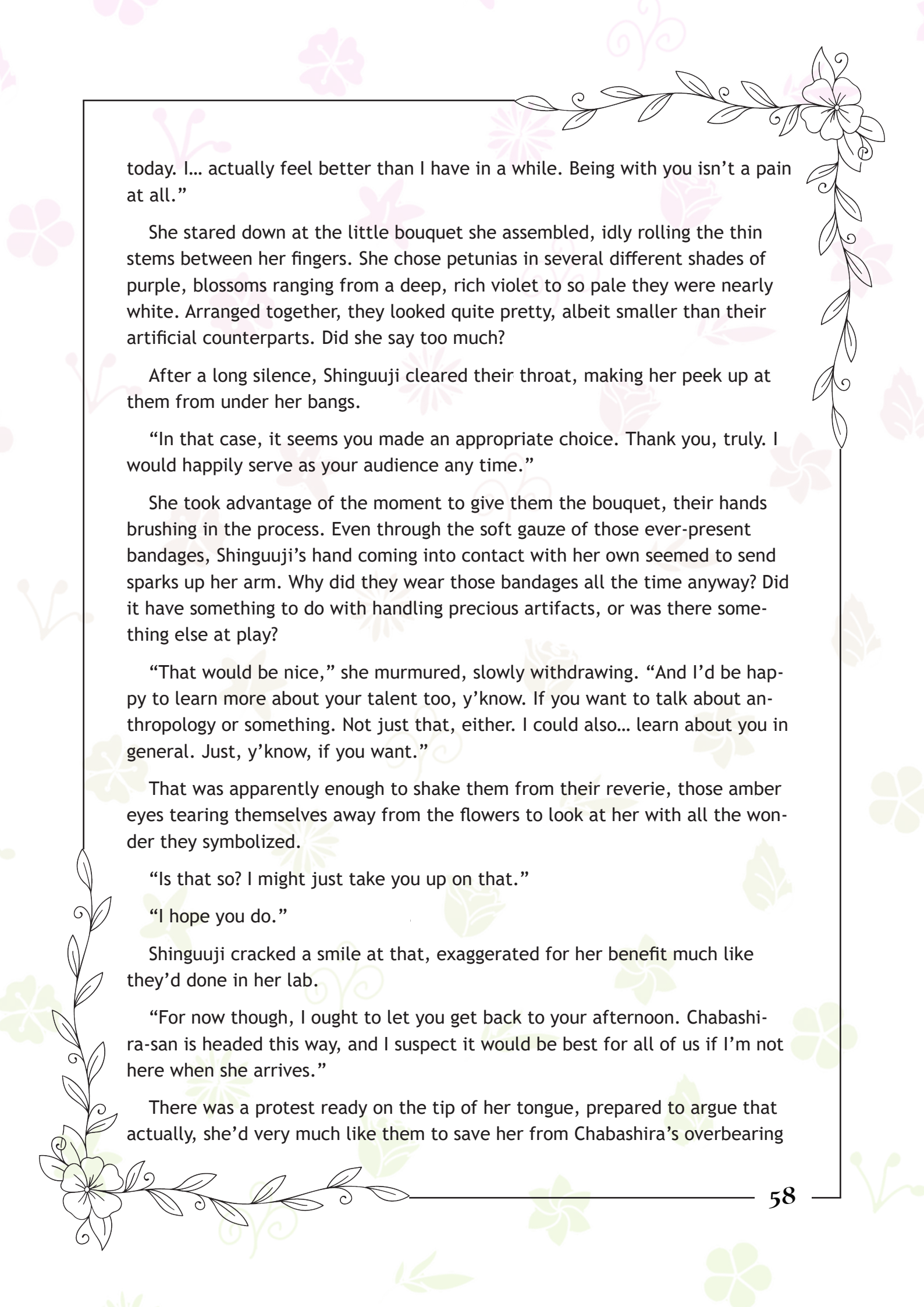
They laughed quietly, a sound that was pure sunshine.

“No need to sound so nervous. Am I that frightening? Very well then, purple petunias. The color purple, as you might already know, is heavily associated with magic. A fitting choice for you, yes? Fantasy, enchantment, whimsy, mystery, even royalty...purple carries these sorts of connotations in many cultures across the world. It is powerful, desired. In this case, I believe mystery and enchantment are rather appropriate after watching your magic show. As for the meaning of petunias themselves, they’re a very interesting flower. They have two possible meanings that couldn’t be further apart. One is quite negative, symbolizing feelings such as anger and resentment, while the other possible meaning is comfort and peace of mind. In essence, the petunia is a flower that can be given to friends and enemies alike.”

Before Himiko could fully process all the new information, distracted by the underlying sultriness in Shinguuji’s voice, they were asking her a question.

“So, Yumeno-san, which is it? Are you angry with me, or do I bring you comfort?”

“The second one, definitely. It’s true,” she admitted, looking down at the petunias rather than meeting their eyes. “You really do bring me comfort, as weird as that is to say. I know we haven’t really hung out much until today, and everyone else thinks you’re a total creep, but... I don’t know. I had a nice time



today. I... actually feel better than I have in a while. Being with you isn't a pain at all."

She stared down at the little bouquet she assembled, idly rolling the thin stems between her fingers. She chose petunias in several different shades of purple, blossoms ranging from a deep, rich violet to so pale they were nearly white. Arranged together, they looked quite pretty, albeit smaller than their artificial counterparts. Did she say too much?

After a long silence, Shinguuji cleared their throat, making her peek up at them from under her bangs.

"In that case, it seems you made an appropriate choice. Thank you, truly. I would happily serve as your audience any time."

She took advantage of the moment to give them the bouquet, their hands brushing in the process. Even through the soft gauze of those ever-present bandages, Shinguuji's hand coming into contact with her own seemed to send sparks up her arm. Why did they wear those bandages all the time anyway? Did it have something to do with handling precious artifacts, or was there something else at play?

"That would be nice," she murmured, slowly withdrawing. "And I'd be happy to learn more about your talent too, y'know. If you want to talk about anthropology or something. Not just that, either. I could also... learn about you in general. Just, y'know, if you want."

That was apparently enough to shake them from their reverie, those amber eyes tearing themselves away from the flowers to look at her with all the wonder they symbolized.

"Is that so? I might just take you up on that."

"I hope you do."

Shinguuji cracked a smile at that, exaggerated for her benefit much like they'd done in her lab.

"For now though, I ought to let you get back to your afternoon. Chabashira-san is headed this way, and I suspect it would be best for all of us if I'm not here when she arrives."

There was a protest ready on the tip of her tongue, prepared to argue that actually, she'd very much like them to save her from Chabashira's overbearing

attention, but she let them go. She didn't want to become the overbearing one.

Sure enough, Chabashira was upon her before Shinguuji made it back to the school building.

"Oh, Himiko-chan! Was that menace bothering you?" she exclaimed, pointing across the courtyard at Shinguuji. "I'll gladly defend you if you need me!"

"No," Himiko replied, biting her lip in a futile attempt to stifle a smile. "No, not at all."







Desktop Wallpaper

By Shenble



PREVIEW

Li'l Ultimate Cupid

By Psychiccupid

CW: Touches on Kotoko's canon backstory

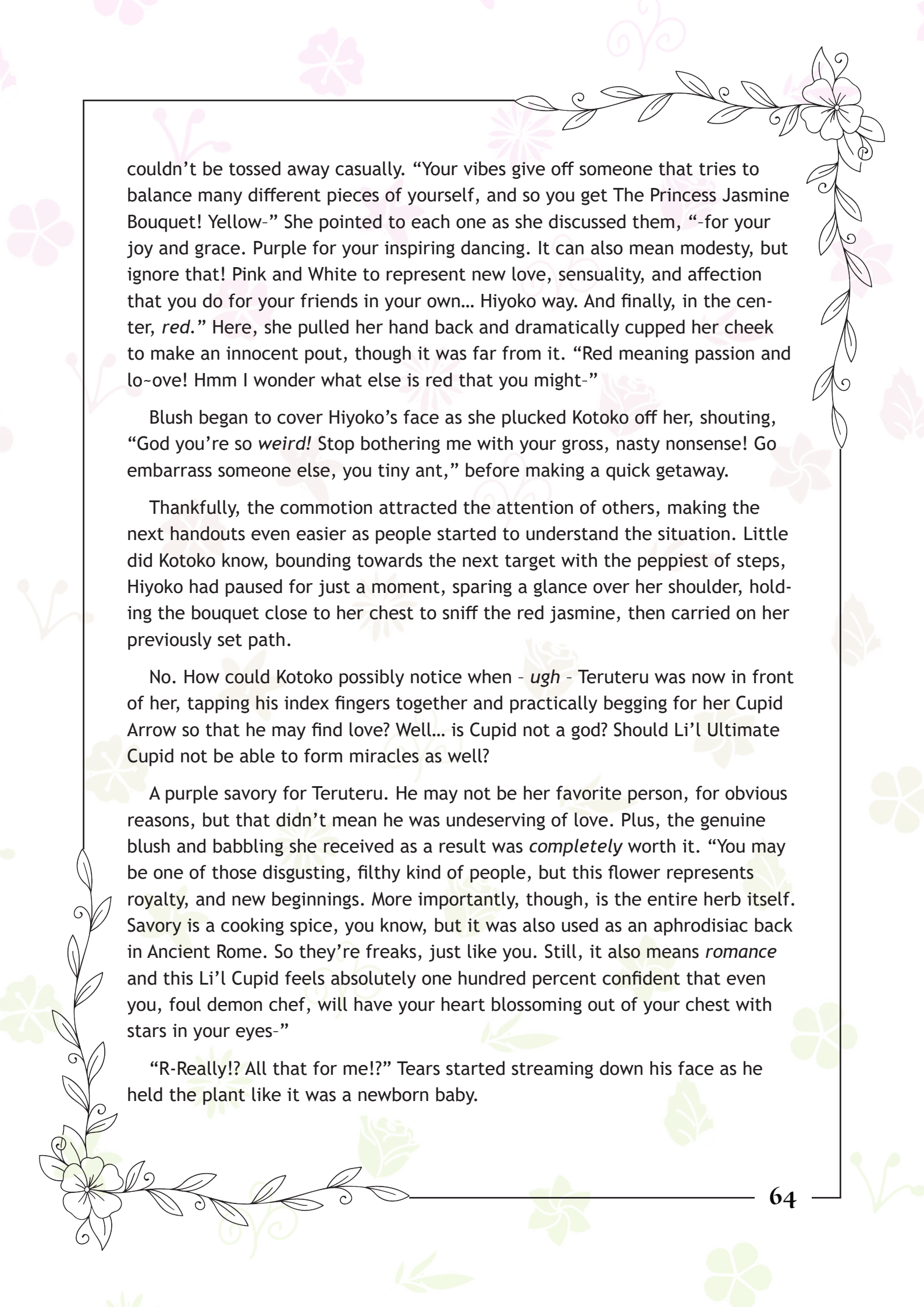
As the morning of February fourteenth dawned, Kotoko Utsugi readied herself uncharacteristically bright and early, for the Li'l Ultimate Drama was given a *biiiig* assignment due today - courtesy of herself, duh - and failure was not an option.

Sporting a big, puffy, tricolored dress, decorated in hearts and two faux angelic wings to boot, she grabbed a comically large basket filled to the brim with flowers and bolted out the door to Hope's Peak Academy where she would one day attend.

This wasn't a rare occurrence for her, though. Kotoko always found reasons to come around and make friends with 'the big kids' when she was allowed. The heads of the school, as well as the students themselves, encouraged her networking abilities wholeheartedly, welcoming her with open arms.

But, first and foremost, she sought out the most important person of all: *Kotoko's rival* - nasty as she was cute! Disgusting as she was eloquent! Off putting as she was hypnotizing! "Good morning, Hiyoko! Happy Valentine's Day! I brought a present for you!" Totes hated as much as she was Kotoko's idol. "For me?" tutted said idol, noticeably perking up at the idea of receiving something. However, when she took a moment to assess the situation, her face fell into bored confusion. "What are you trying to be? Some little fairy princess? Pffft! That's so childish."

Puh-lease. Like Kotoko wasn't used to this nasty attitude. "Close, close! Today, I am-" She did a big twirl, ending in a playful wink, "-Li'l Ultimate Cupid! The messenger of absolute beauty and maturity! Here to guide you on your path to love!" It was then that she pulled out five different colored jasmines wrapped in a familiar green sash from right on the tippity top of the pile, placing it in Hiyoko's hands and clasping her own around them so that the flowers



couldn't be tossed away casually. "Your vibes give off someone that tries to balance many different pieces of yourself, and so you get The Princess Jasmine Bouquet! Yellow-" She pointed to each one as she discussed them, "-for your joy and grace. Purple for your inspiring dancing. It can also mean modesty, but ignore that! Pink and White to represent new love, sensuality, and affection that you do for your friends in your own... Hiyoko way. And finally, in the center, *red*." Here, she pulled her hand back and dramatically cupped her cheek to make an innocent pout, though it was far from it. "Red meaning passion and lo-ove! Hmm I wonder what else is red that you might-"

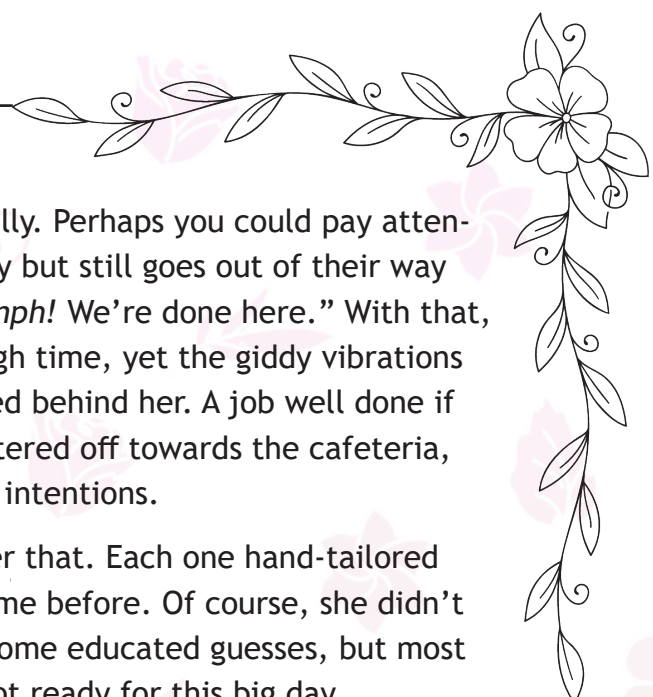
Blush began to cover Hiyoko's face as she plucked Kotoko off her, shouting, "God you're so *weird*! Stop bothering me with your gross, nasty nonsense! Go embarrass someone else, you tiny ant," before making a quick getaway.

Thankfully, the commotion attracted the attention of others, making the next handouts even easier as people started to understand the situation. Little did Kotoko know, bounding towards the next target with the peppiest of steps, Hiyoko had paused for just a moment, sparing a glance over her shoulder, holding the bouquet close to her chest to sniff the red jasmine, then carried on her previously set path.

No. How could Kotoko possibly notice when - *ugh* - Teruteru was now in front of her, tapping his index fingers together and practically begging for her Cupid Arrow so that he may find love? Well... is Cupid not a god? Should Li'l Ultimate Cupid not be able to form miracles as well?

A purple savory for Teruteru. He may not be her favorite person, for obvious reasons, but that didn't mean he was undeserving of love. Plus, the genuine blush and babbling she received as a result was *completely* worth it. "You may be one of those disgusting, filthy kind of people, but this flower represents royalty, and new beginnings. More importantly, though, is the entire herb itself. Savory is a cooking spice, you know, but it was also used as an aphrodisiac back in Ancient Rome. So they're freaks, just like you. Still, it also means *romance* and this Li'l Cupid feels absolutely one hundred percent confident that even you, foul demon chef, will have your heart blossoming out of your chest with stars in your eyes-"

"R-Really!? All that for me!?" Tears started streaming down his face as he held the plant like it was a newborn baby.



“-Hey! Don’t interrupt my speech! Yes, really. Perhaps you could pay attention to *someone* who looks different every day but still goes out of their way more often than others to eat your meals. *Hmph!* We’re done here.” With that, she stormed off, finding herself wasting enough time, yet the giddy vibrations of someone who’d truly been moved resonated behind her. A job well done if she did say so herself. His small footsteps pittered off towards the cafeteria, and she sincerely hoped they were with good intentions.

More and more flowers were given out after that. Each one hand-tailored to the person receiving it just like all that came before. Of course, she didn’t know *everyone* in the school, so there were some educated guesses, but most were pre-assigned weeks in advance as she got ready for this big day.

After handing out quite a few to people’s faces, such as a set composing of one red and one purple carnation tied together with a lovely black ribbon to Celeste, who discreetly passed it along to Kyoko (who wouldn’t have stopped by Kotoko’s little shop anyway), she also began sneaking flowers into people’s lockers. Was it breaking and entering? Yes. Was it worth it? SUPER yes! How else was she going to deliver the purple and blue irises wrapped in forget-me-nots to Kokichi? Not like Mr. Pants-on-fire was going to come to her either! But the Queen and Jester of Liars were especially fun selections for one Li’l Ultimate Cupid! No silly tsuntsuns could get past her on the Day of Love!

Ah... unlike them, though... there were also people with *too many* options. “Hello, Kotoko! Would you like an accompanist with you today?” Kaede surprised her, pulling out a small, Valentine’s Day-decorated keytar from seemingly nowhere and holding it up proudly. “I’m sure a hardworking angel like yourself could use a soundtrack?” It took all of Kotoko’s willpower not to yawn.

“No time! Big delivery for one Piano Freak!” She watched as Kaede’s lip twitched a bit at the name. Odd. Hiyoko had once told her that she’d loved to be called that. “I’ve got one green orchid for perhaps someone who needs some good fortune finding a sister or twelve, one blue orchid for someone refined and appreciates the beauty of humans they might not understand, one red orchid for someone strong and full of courage despite their talents, it might also mean true love ehe, one purple orchid for someone with dignity and respect who always brings a sense of admiration to her cosplays, one white orchid for someone with elegance and beauty who can do anything requested of them, and finally, the most vibrant of all, an orange orchid for someone full of pride and boldness who constantly shows off their creativity and excitement!”

Gosh, she was nearly out of breath at that one. Silly blondie was getting buried in different flowers - but that just made Kotoko smile gleefully. Punishment for the pianist being so... available! Oh Li'l Cupid, you Ultimate Genius!

Through it all, Kaede kept trying to talk, play, and hold all these petals at the same time. Yet when everything was said and done, Kotoko was off again, not even saying goodbye before throwing more plant names and explanations at people as she saw them, shoving more and more into lockers as she didn't.

One of the last flowers before the bottom of the basket began to peek through was a yellow tulip, and it would be difficult to catch its future owner, as he hardly ever stayed in one place for too long. However, as he was one of the only people she was familiar with before he'd enrolled in the academy, she knew *exactly* how to get him. "Ohhhh man, despite how tired I am, I sure could go for a light run right about-"

"Did you say go for a run?" Bingo!

"Noooope! Sorry Yuta, you must've been hearing things! But, hey, while I have you here, I have a li'l gift for you!"

Sparkles took over his eyes as he bounded up closer. Jeez, what would it be like to have that kind of energy? "For me!? What's the occasion?"

... She deserved a trophy for keeping that scream in. "Why, it's Valentine's Day! And I'm your personal Li'l Ultimate Cupid, at your service! Please take this tulip, its yellowness symbolizing happiness and hope, just like you! They *also* say it's most literal statement is 'there's sunshine in your smile' hehe, does that color and description make anyone come to mind?" Her smirk grew three sizes as he bolted off towards the computer room, too excited to even thank her. If she heard a crash and a squeak, that only meant she was right on track!

Right on track! *Another was gifted.*

Right on track. *And another.*

Right on track... *And another.*

Until only one flower remained, crumpled and begging for mercy as it had endured the weight of all the others for many hours.

Huh? How did this get here? It wasn't.... She didn't pick this out for anyone, or at least didn't remember doing so.

This lone, squished, wilted white lily.

Its petals were peeling and losing their color. When she picked it up to smell it, it'd clearly been taken over by all the other smells it was forced underneath throughout the day. Overall, looking at it was just... sad.

Her hands tightened around it, thoroughly picking apart every flaw with her intense eyes - the ripped leaves, the exposed pollen, the gross almost-powder coming off of it in its damaged state.

This flower was *revolting*.

And, she realized with horror who it was for.

This flower was *hers*.

White lily, meaning purity, innocence - now destroyed. Heh, literally *deflowered*. How remarkable. How putrid.

How pathetic.

To anyone walking by, they would see a young woman, no, a *child*, staring at a disheveled flower, most likely assuming that she was upset that one of her gifts had gotten destroyed in the process.

But no. Noooo, no, no.

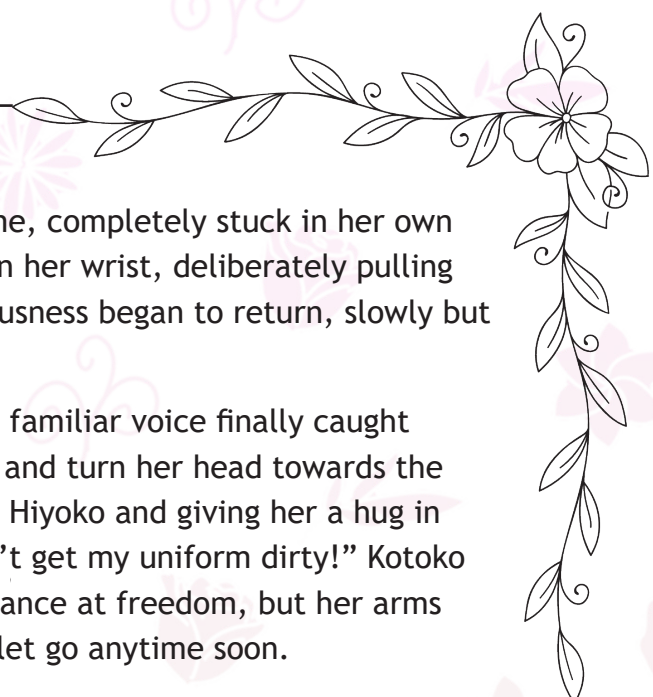
This flower was hers.

It was exactly as it was supposed to look.

She wanted to say something. Wanted to talk herself out of this, wanted to be invisible, but no words left her mouth, nor did her feet move. Instead, she held this poor flower as if it was something pitiful, something that could be thrown in the trash in a matter of seconds... and cried.

At first, her tears were sad, craving the loss of once was, then they turned angry, taking all her willpower not to rip off each and every petal while screaming, "*Disgusting, nasty flower!*" before tossing it on the floor. Her eyes later relaxed as she held the lily close, cradling it tenderly and wanting to tell it, "*it's going to be okay.*" In the end though, she tossed the flower back into the basket, dropping the whole thing on the floor afterwards, and tried to compose herself. The big kids couldn't see her like this... that would be... so embarrassing.

Yet, despite everything, the sobbing, the loathing, the *hatred*, Kotoko didn't



move from the initial spot for a long, long time, completely stuck in her own head. It wasn't until she felt a soft grasp upon her wrist, deliberately pulling her into a nearby classroom, that her consciousness began to return, slowly but surely. "H-Huh?"

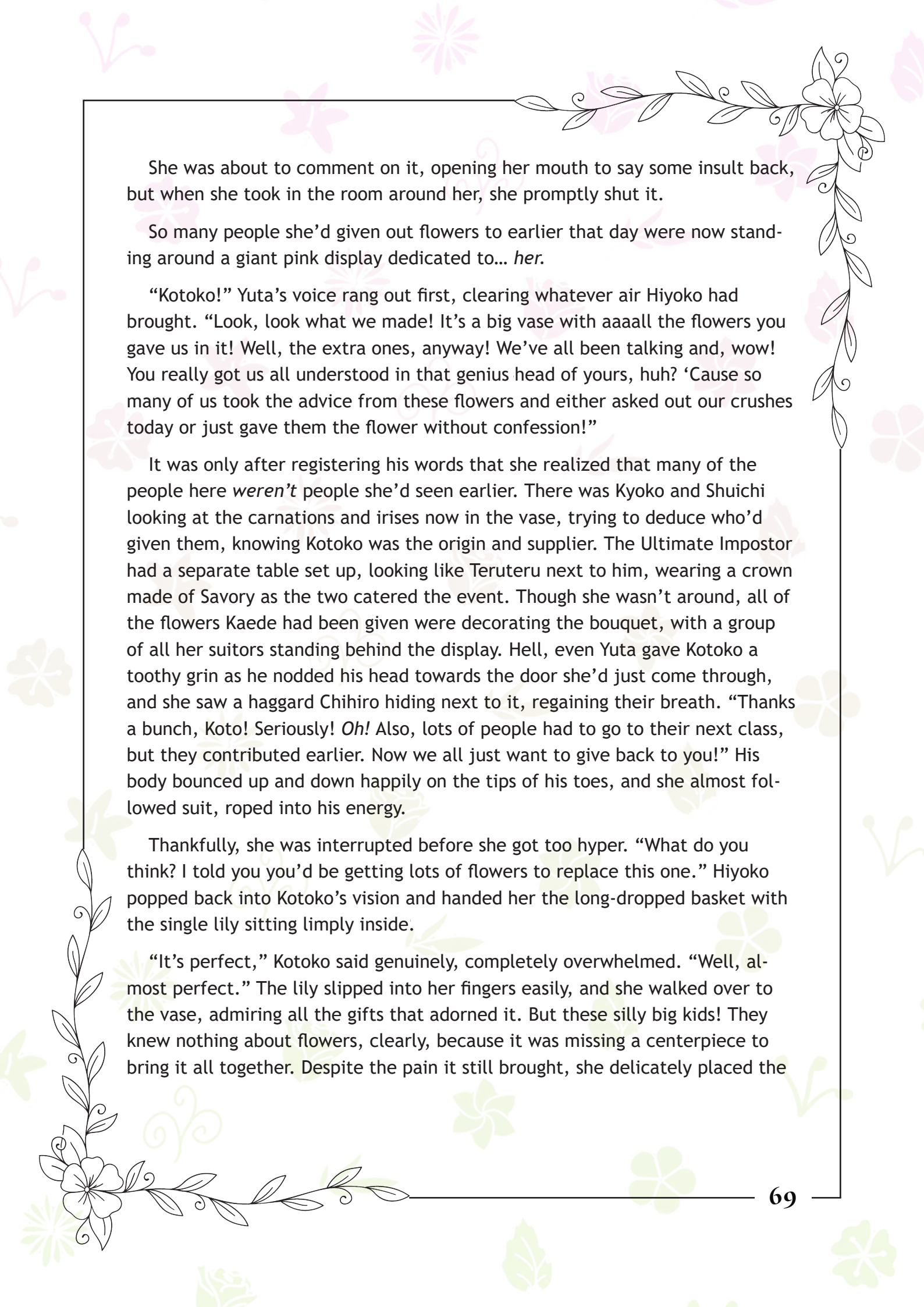
"Hmph. All those tears over a flower?" The familiar voice finally caught Kotoko's attention, making it easy to perk up and turn her head towards the sound of her rival, immediately running up to Hiyoko and giving her a hug in thanks that she'd never say aloud. "Hey! Don't get my uniform dirty!" Kotoko was littered in pushes and pats for a slight chance at freedom, but her arms had latched on tight and she wasn't going to let go anytime soon.

Sighing, acquiescing, Hiyoko then began threading her fingers through pink pigtails, humming, "Do you want to talk about it? This might be the only time I'll listen, so you should take it." In all honesty, Kotoko didn't really want to.

Or, more accurately, she didn't think she *could* talk about it, so instead, she just shook her head side to side into the kimono, to which Hiyoko merely hummed and let them both sit in 'silence'. School was still happening outside, Kotoko was making sniffing noises, but it was a sanctuary at this moment for the small child.

It took a few minutes of getting her emotions out, but once she had tired herself out, Hiyoko decided it was time to act. "Hey, hey. I don't know what happened, and I'm sure not gonna ask a little brat like you to explain it, but I *do* know something that'll cheer you up. You seem to be really upset about that wilted flower, right? More so than you should be, in my opinion. But what if we got you a bunch of flowers? Could you stop crying long enough to get there?" The harsh words may sound, well, harsh - it's Hiyoko after all - but there wasn't the usual nastiness behind them. Instead, Kotoko let go and took a few steps back, taking a deep breath before nodding. "Great. Finally. Let's fix you up, kid."

The next thing she knew, once Hiyoko had approved of her post-cry stylings, Kotoko was once again whisked away by the wrist until they made it to another classroom door. There was no hesitation or fanfare, just the *boom* of the door slamming open and Hiyoko's voice announcing, "Move out of the way, peasants! A goddess is finally here to make her entrance!" Which made Kotoko giggle, thinking the girl was talking about herself.



She was about to comment on it, opening her mouth to say some insult back, but when she took in the room around her, she promptly shut it.

So many people she'd given out flowers to earlier that day were now standing around a giant pink display dedicated to... *her*.

"Kotoko!" Yuta's voice rang out first, clearing whatever air Hiyoko had brought. "Look, look what we made! It's a big vase with aaaall the flowers you gave us in it! Well, the extra ones, anyway! We've all been talking and, wow! You really got us all understood in that genius head of yours, huh? 'Cause so many of us took the advice from these flowers and either asked out our crushes today or just gave them the flower without confession!"

It was only after registering his words that she realized that many of the people here *weren't* people she'd seen earlier. There was Kyoko and Shuichi looking at the carnations and irises now in the vase, trying to deduce who'd given them, knowing Kotoko was the origin and supplier. The Ultimate Impostor had a separate table set up, looking like Teruteru next to him, wearing a crown made of Savory as the two catered the event. Though she wasn't around, all of the flowers Kaede had been given were decorating the bouquet, with a group of all her suitors standing behind the display. Hell, even Yuta gave Kotoko a toothy grin as he nodded his head towards the door she'd just come through, and she saw a haggard Chihiro hiding next to it, regaining their breath. "Thanks a bunch, Koto! Seriously! *Oh!* Also, lots of people had to go to their next class, but they contributed earlier. Now we all just want to give back to you!" His body bounced up and down happily on the tips of his toes, and she almost followed suit, roped into his energy.

Thankfully, she was interrupted before she got too hyper. "What do you think? I told you you'd be getting lots of flowers to replace this one." Hiyoko popped back into Kotoko's vision and handed her the long-dropped basket with the single lily sitting limply inside.

"It's perfect," Kotoko said genuinely, completely overwhelmed. "Well, almost perfect." The lily slipped into her fingers easily, and she walked over to the vase, admiring all the gifts that adorned it. But these silly big kids! They knew nothing about flowers, clearly, because it was missing a centerpiece to bring it all together. Despite the pain it still brought, she delicately placed the

wilted flower right in the middle of all the others, opening it wide and displaying it as much as possible.

Sure, it wasn't the prettiest, but it didn't need to be. Here was Kotoko, and here was the world her existence created. A gorgeous bouquet of love and friendship - all with her as the star of it; She completed it.

"C'mon, c'mon. Everyone line up! Now that the bouquet is complete, we should take a photo," Mahiru cried out, holding up her camera. Her sudden appearance didn't startle Kotoko in the slightest, causing the youngest girl to get a devilish smile upon her face.

When everyone listened and finished finding their spots, it gave Kotoko the perfect line of sight to see a red jasmine hiding amongst a red head of hair, making her giddily shout, "Say Li'l Ultimate Cupid, everyone!" as she elbowed Hiyoko in the ribs - the moment forever captured with the single click of Mahiru's finger.









a poignant legacy

By Imeda

I want to be remembered. I want to do something great. I want to be more than just another blip in the universe's grand scheme. I want to be great. I want, I want, I want.

For as long as she can remember, Miu has always *wanted*. From the ripe old age of five, she'd been putting her toys together in crude inventions in an effort to do something meaningful—to invent something that could prove that she was worth something.

It's been ten years or so and nothing's changed; she still works on her inventions during every waking moment and Miu Iruma still *wants*.

She wipes at her forehead as grease splashes up from the machine she'd been working on. It leaves a dark stain on the front of her pink t-shirt and Miu is only a little disappointed from that—it was one of her favourite shirts.

Her laboratory smells sweet, a delicate scent wafting around the room from the vase of flowers sitting on the table to her left. They'd been a gift from Kirumi, something pretty to add to the environment of her workshop, Kirumi had said.

They're going to wilt soon, Miu thinks.

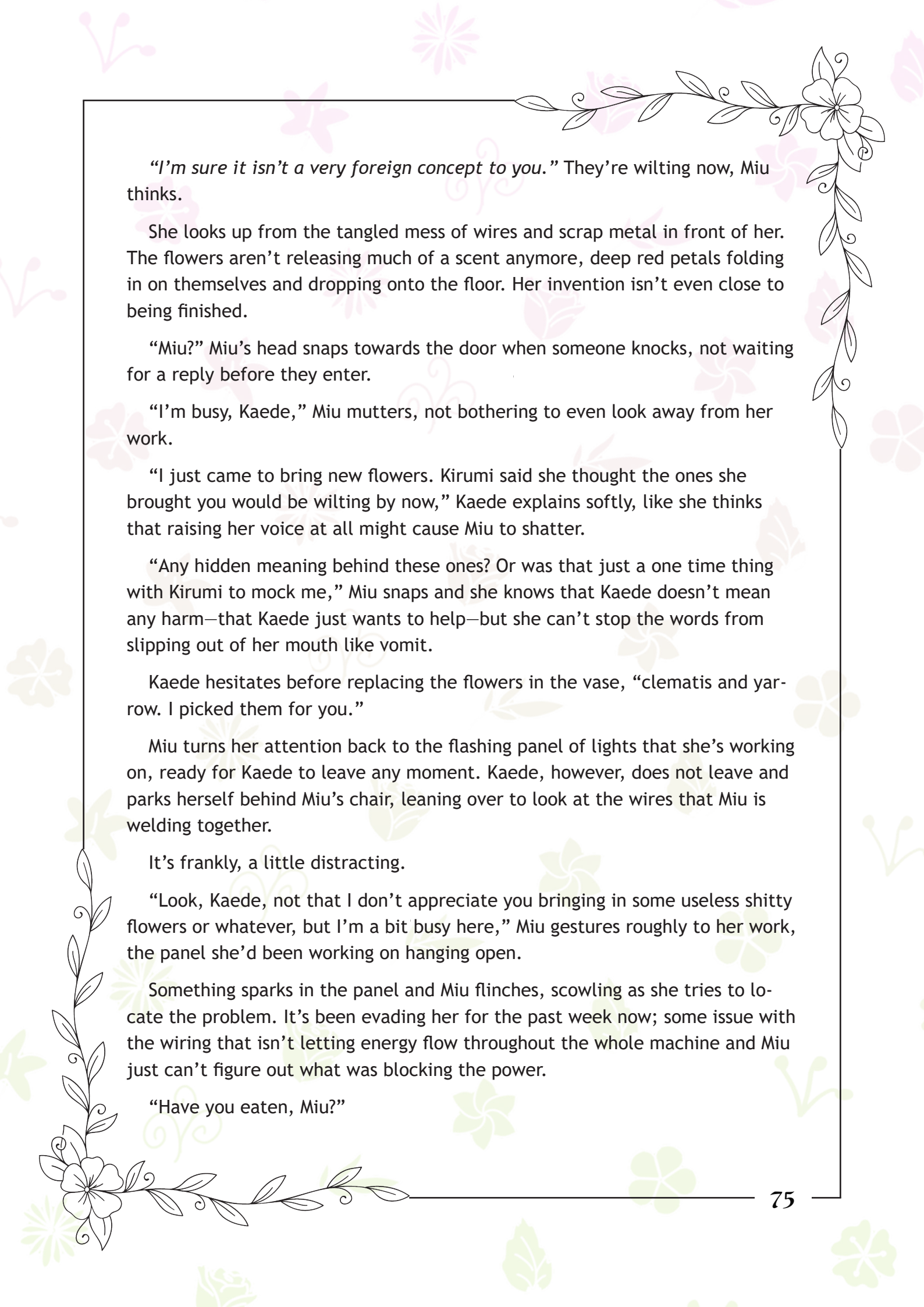
"Flowers? Why?" Miu wrinkles up her face as Kirumi places the red flowers into a vase on the table.

"Do you know what these flowers are?" Kirumi asks as she turns to face Miu, smoothing down the wrinkles in her apron.

Miu shrugs, "no. Should I?"

"Amaryllis. They mean pride," Kirumi explains as she finishes up her arrangement of flowers, the bright red petals nearly glaring at Miu.

"Pride, huh?" Miu muses softly, stealing a glance at the flowers.



"I'm sure it isn't a very foreign concept to you." They're wilting now, Miu thinks.

She looks up from the tangled mess of wires and scrap metal in front of her. The flowers aren't releasing much of a scent anymore, deep red petals folding in on themselves and dropping onto the floor. Her invention isn't even close to being finished.

"Miu?" Miu's head snaps towards the door when someone knocks, not waiting for a reply before they enter.

"I'm busy, Kaede," Miu mutters, not bothering to even look away from her work.

"I just came to bring new flowers. Kirumi said she thought the ones she brought you would be wilting by now," Kaede explains softly, like she thinks that raising her voice at all might cause Miu to shatter.

"Any hidden meaning behind these ones? Or was that just a one time thing with Kirumi to mock me," Miu snaps and she knows that Kaede doesn't mean any harm—that Kaede just wants to help—but she can't stop the words from slipping out of her mouth like vomit.

Kaede hesitates before replacing the flowers in the vase, "clematis and yar-row. I picked them for you."

Miu turns her attention back to the flashing panel of lights that she's working on, ready for Kaede to leave any moment. Kaede, however, does not leave and parks herself behind Miu's chair, leaning over to look at the wires that Miu is welding together.

It's frankly, a little distracting.

"Look, Kaede, not that I don't appreciate you bringing in some useless shitty flowers or whatever, but I'm a bit busy here," Miu gestures roughly to her work, the panel she'd been working on hanging open.

Something sparks in the panel and Miu flinches, scowling as she tries to locate the problem. It's been evading her for the past week now; some issue with the wiring that isn't letting energy flow throughout the whole machine and Miu just can't figure out what was blocking the power.

"Have you eaten, Miu?"

“What?”

“You’ve been in here for nearly a week. Have you eaten at all?” Kaede repeats and Miu stares at her, her tongue drying up in her mouth, “Miu?”

“Fuck off, Kaede,” Miu stands up, pushing her chair backwards.

“Miu, I’m just trying to-“

“No, I’m serious, fuck off. You don’t care. Stop acting like you do,” Miu spits, digging her fingernails into the palm of her hand.

“I care about you, of *course* I do,” Kaede takes a step toward her and Miu instinctively moves backwards.

“You don’t get it, Kaede, I don’t have the time for this. I need to finish this before-“

“Before what?”

Miu’s gaze snaps to the side, biting down on her lip hard enough to draw a thin seam of blood.

Kaede looks at Miu with soft purple eyes and it strikes Miu that Kaede’s looking at her with *pity*; like Miu isn’t the greatest mind of their generation, like Miu isn’t a *genius*.

What Kaede thinks of her doesn’t matter because Kaede is going to be *forgotten*; Miu is going to live on. She’s going to be studied in schools and people are going to remember her. She’s not going to be just another nobody who lives a life of *nothing* and then dies, nothing more than dust returning to the universe.

She’s going to be so much more.

“I’m going to be great, Kaede,” Miu whispers, flinching when her machine sparks up at her, “I’m going to be great or nothing and I refuse to be nothing.”

Miu doesn’t look back at Kaede and the only reason she knows that Kaede has left is the soft click of her workshop door as Kaede shuts it behind her.



“Miu?”

“Fuck off,” Miu mutters between gritted teeth as her workshop door swings open.

“Oh, sorry, I can come back later?” Kiibo seems startled at the comment, staring at Miu with wide eyes like he really didn’t mean to interrupt.

Miu spins around in her chair to face, sighing heavily, “no, Kiibo, it’s fine. What do you want?”

“I just- I’ve been having this problem and I wanted to know if you could fix it?” Kiibo asks tentatively, fiddling with his hands behind his back, “I mean, if you’re busy then that’s okay! You’re just the only person I know who can help with this type of stuff and you’re *really* smart so I thought-”

“I’ll help, Kiibo. What’s up?”

Miu can feel heat rush to her cheeks; Kiibo knows exactly how to flatter her and the worst part is that he doesn’t even know that he’s doing it. Kiibo’s just so *sweet* and earnest and Miu can’t help but find his small smile endearing.

“Y’know how you installed that flashlight inside of me last week?” Kiibo asks and when Miu nods, he lights up the flashlight just for good measure, “well, I’ve been thinking, what if we made it change colours? Like a-”

“-like a fuckin’ disco ball!” Miu literally jumps out of her chair to run towards Kiibo, clamping her hands down on the cold metal plates of his shoulders, “you’re a genius, Kiibo!” “I am?” Kiibo cocks his head to the side and Miu grins.

She shoos Kiibo out and the second she’s alone in her workshop, she pushes her previous invention to the side and reaches for several rolls of coloured film from one of her shelves.

She’s going to be great and she’s going to make Kiibo great too.



It takes Miu more than a few hours to get the lights working right because she’s not only an overachiever, but also a perfectionist. At first, the red light was too *red* and then it wasn’t red *enough* so she’d had to fiddle with layers

upon layers of coloured film sheets until she eventually came up with something that she was satisfied with.

And that is exactly what's sitting in front of her right now; a multi-coloured flashlight ready to fit inside of Kiibo with just the click of a few straps.

Soon enough, Miu's on her way to the dining hall where Kiibo sent her a text that he'd be waiting.

"Kiibo! Take a look at what I got right here!" Miu grins as she shakes the invention in the air, literally skipping over to the table where Kiibo's sitting with Kaede and Shuichi.

Kiibo's eyes literally *light up* (and Miu means *literally*. The flashlights she installed in Kiibo's eyes last wekk light up when he's happy), "you made it?"

"Sure did, Kiibs," Miu says when Kiibo stands up, "now turn around and let me put this sucker inside of you."

Kiibo does as she says and within seconds, Miu has the new and improved flashlight implanted inside of his skull. Kiibo immediately lights up the flashlight, sending flashes of rainbow light across the room.

"Woah, Miu, that's really cool," Shuichi says softly, watching as the bright lights flood the room.

Kaede nods in agreement, "it really is."

Miu shifts her weight from her left foot to her right, biting down *hard* on her lip when Kaede talks. She knows that she wasn't the *nicest* to Kaede; she might be egotistical, but she's still self-aware. Apologies don't come easily to her—they never have. They fight and claw against her skull because she *wants*, she *wants* to apologize, but she can never find the words.

"Kaede, can I talk to you for a second?" she mutters, locking her gaze with the floor and refusing to make eye contact with the aforementioned blonde.

"Yeah, sure. What's up?" Kaede stands up and walks off to the side with Miu.

Miu looks at her; kind, *sweet* Kaede. Kaede who just wanted to help and Miu fucking *snapped* at her.

"imsorryididntmeantoyellatyou."

"Sorry, what was that?" Kaede asks and Miu groans loudly.

She sucks in a deep breath, shutting her eyes for a moment to try to recollect her thoughts.

"I'm sorry," Miu spits out between gritted teeth.

Kaede's eyes widen, "you're *sorry*?"

Come *on*, is it really *that* surprising for Miu Iruma to apologize for something?

(Nobody answer that. Miu already knows that the answer's yes.)

"I didn't mean to yell at you. I was just- I wanted to-" Miu lets out a shaky breath, "I guess I don't have to be *great* all the time."

Kaede smiles, "Miu, it's *okay*. I was just worried about you because I care about you." Miu finally snaps her gaze up from the floor and she looks at Kaede.

"Thank you," she admits, "most people don't."

"My turn?" Kiibo pokes Kaede's shoulder and Kaede nods, walking back to Shuichi and shooting a small wave at Miu before she leaves.

"What's up, Kiiibs?" Miu's feeling just a little shaken from having to apologize and it takes her a little extra effort to remove the shake from her voice.

Kiibo's turned off the flashlight eyes by now, smiling softly at Miu. He has something held behind his back that Miu can't quite make out.

"I heard what you said to Kaede," he says, "and I just wanted to thank you."

Miu cocks her head to the side, "for what?"

"For making these for me," Kiibo lights up the flashlight in a bright pink light as a demonstration.

Miu scoffs, "it was nothing."

Kiibo locks eyes with Miu, "it was *everything* to me."

There's something about his words that makes Miu think it might just be true; that something Miu invented in an afternoon might mean the world to Kiibo because she'd made it *for* him.

"I know you think you have to be great all the time, but I think you already are great. Everything you do, you do for others and you don't ever admit it,"

Kiibo smiles softly and it feels like he's unzipping Miu's skin and laying her soul bare on the cold, ceramic floor.

"Kiibo-"

"I know you don't want the world to forget you, but I want you to know that I won't ever forget you," Kiibo pulls a bouquet of flowers from behind his back, presenting the little blue flowers to Miu, "thank you."

Miu gingerly takes the flowers, running a finger across one of the petals, "Kiibo, they're beautiful."

"They're forget-me-nots," he explains and right when Miu thinks he's going to say something else, he smiles and walks away.

Miu lifts the bouquet to her nose, taking in a deep whiff of the flowers. They don't have much scent at all, but there's a slight fruity odour that Miu appreciates. They really are pretty flowers, little bundles of blue petals around soft green leaves.

She glances over at the table where Kiibo, Kaede, and Shuichi are sitting, the three of them laughing as Kiibo continues to show off his new disco ball light.

Maybe Kiibo was right. Maybe she doesn't need to be great all the time. Maybe a legacy isn't the only thing that matters.

Maybe she already is great.









ad vitam aeternam

By Jolt

A hospital room was no place for a flower to grow. There must be something in the air about this place that stifled it, that strangled stems and bowed blossoms downward. Korekiyo had no other explanation for why he'd had to change the flowers in the vase here so often. Today he'd brought a bouquet of daisies and peonies, which Sister fortunately seemed satisfied with. They were one of the few things Korekiyo had to liven up her plain, sterile room. And with the recent news that she had but a few short months left, she needed every sign of life Korekiyo could bring her.

Even more of a pity that the flowers on the end table would succumb before long too. Strictly speaking, they were already dead.

It had made Sister absolutely miserable, this prognosis, much more than usual. She hadn't stopped crying since the doctor told them both, shaking like a fallen leaf in her bed, muttering denial and directionless prayer into her frail hands. And all Korekiyo could do was look on from the bedside armchair, knowing that no physical or verbal comfort he was capable of would suffice.

Numbly, he wondered how long this new bouquet would last. Despite the painstaking lengths to which Korekiyo had gone to preserve their freshness, every single one of them had yet to last a week. Perhaps this one would be different; perhaps it'd wilt just as all the others had.

A sudden grip on Korekiyo's arm drew his eyes back to Sister—to her bony hand curled weakly around his wrist, her pallid face streaked with tears and curtained by strands of greasy dark hair.

"Korekiyo," she whispered, her first real spoken word since receiving the news. "You must help me. You *must* do something. I—" Her voice caught in her throat. "I have to *live*."

"Sister...." Korekiyo shifted in his seat, uncomfortable. Uncertain of what he could possibly do at this point.

"Please," she rasped. "I can't—I can't lose you, Korekiyo, I can't die, I'm not ready—I don't want to die—" She wheezed a panicked breath. "You must do something—*anything*. Promise me you'll help me live." Her grip tightened, her gaze locked on Korekiyo's. "Please."

It's no use, Korekiyo's rational mind screamed at him. If the doctors could do nothing more, then neither could he. A hospital bed was no place of miracles; it was a place of stagnation, of withering and rot. There was no saving Sister. There couldn't be.

But to go against her orders would be for Korekiyo to renounce her altogether, to estrange himself from his only meaningful connection to humanity. It would be to leave her to die, and to end up all alone.

Sister's eyes seared Korekiyo's face, begging. Helpless. *Desperate*.

And Korekiyo knew he couldn't lose her either. What would he be left with? What would he *be*?

"I understand," he sighed. "As you wish, Sister."

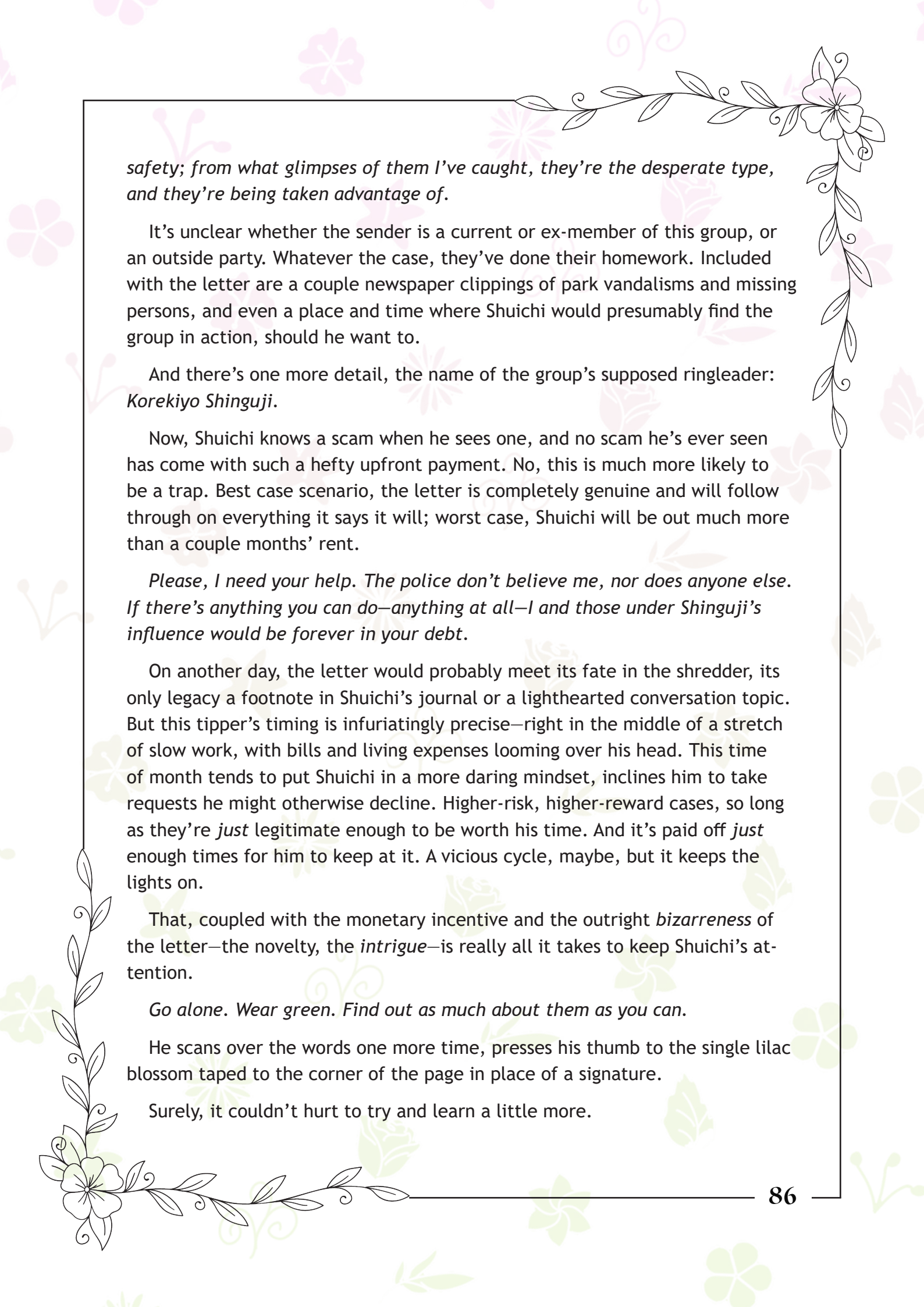


Shuichi Saihara has been a detective for most of his life, wrapped up in mysteries compelling and less-so since he was a child shuffling paperwork for his uncle. In that time he's seen some weird cases; one is bound to, in this line of work.

But, on an unusually cool summer morning, he receives a request quite unlike any he's received before.

The tip is anonymous—not unheard of, but still a bit of a red flag. An envelope with no return address, a printer-paper letter enfolding an upfront sum and a promise of much more, if he followed its instructions.

I've learned of a strange group of people that acts like a cult, the letter reads. They seem to be obsessed with trying to attain immortality. I suspect they've been raiding some of the local parks and gardens to gather materials for... whatever they're planning. I'm particularly concerned for the recruits'



safety; from what glimpses of them I've caught, they're the desperate type, and they're being taken advantage of.

It's unclear whether the sender is a current or ex-member of this group, or an outside party. Whatever the case, they've done their homework. Included with the letter are a couple newspaper clippings of park vandalisms and missing persons, and even a place and time where Shuichi would presumably find the group in action, should he want to.

And there's one more detail, the name of the group's supposed ringleader: *Korekiyo Shinguji.*

Now, Shuichi knows a scam when he sees one, and no scam he's ever seen has come with such a hefty upfront payment. No, this is much more likely to be a trap. Best case scenario, the letter is completely genuine and will follow through on everything it says it will; worst case, Shuichi will be out much more than a couple months' rent.

Please, I need your help. The police don't believe me, nor does anyone else. If there's anything you can do—anything at all—I and those under Shinguji's influence would be forever in your debt.

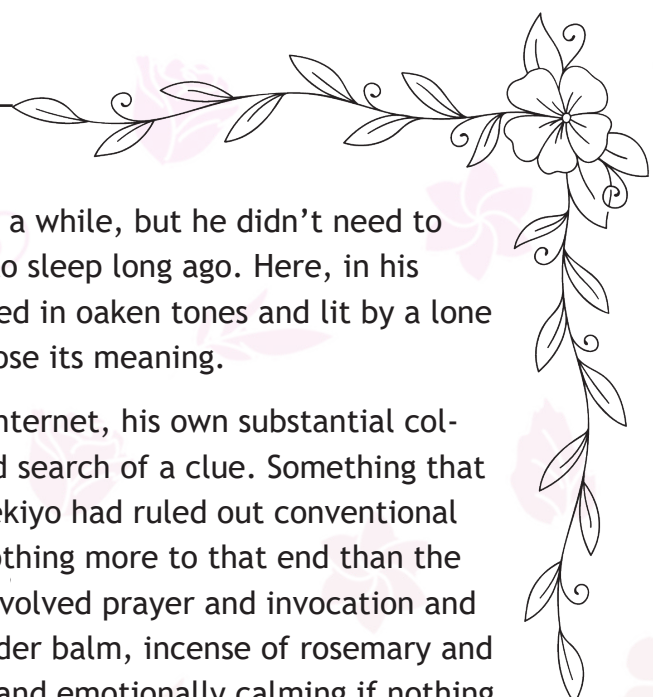
On another day, the letter would probably meet its fate in the shredder, its only legacy a footnote in Shuichi's journal or a lighthearted conversation topic. But this tipper's timing is infuriatingly precise—right in the middle of a stretch of slow work, with bills and living expenses looming over his head. This time of month tends to put Shuichi in a more daring mindset, inclines him to take requests he might otherwise decline. Higher-risk, higher-reward cases, so long as they're *just* legitimate enough to be worth his time. And it's paid off *just* enough times for him to keep at it. A vicious cycle, maybe, but it keeps the lights on.

That, coupled with the monetary incentive and the outright *bizarreness* of the letter—the novelty, the *intrigue*—is really all it takes to keep Shuichi's attention.

Go alone. Wear green. Find out as much about them as you can.

He scans over the words one more time, presses his thumb to the single lilac blossom taped to the corner of the page in place of a signature.

Surely, it couldn't hurt to try and learn a little more.



Korekiyo hadn't checked the clock in quite a while, but he didn't need to know the time to know he should have gone to sleep long ago. Here, in his bedroom's tiny windowless study nook, steeped in oaken tones and lit by a lone flickering yellow desk lamp, time tended to lose its meaning.

He'd looked everywhere—the library, the internet, his own substantial collection of anthropological literature—in fervid search of a clue. Something that might help Sister. *Anything*. Very quickly Korekiyo had ruled out conventional medical treatment, since he could provide nothing more to that end than the hospital staff. Most of his efforts so far had involved prayer and invocation and the odd natural ward—peppermint tea, lavender balm, incense of rosemary and thyme. Simple to prepare, readily available, and emotionally calming if nothing else.

But herbs and prayers on their own were nowhere near enough; Sister's illness was too strong, too all-consuming. Despite Korekiyo's endeavors, she grew weaker still with each passing day. And his countless hours of research had left him with but a single lead, and a tenuous one at that.

Immortalism. The belief that humans had inherent potential to live forever, and the inner search for the key to unlock said potential. A way to forgo death entirely—spiritually, but *physically* too.

Korekiyo had stumbled across it by pure chance, and in truth, almost everything he could dig up on the topic seemed... shady. Pseudoscientific. Too good to be true. Korekiyo wasn't typically one for superstition, but something about it felt ominous. As if he'd chanced upon a dangerous rabbit-hole, unfathomably deep and ringed with rhododendrons, and he was teetering right on the edge of it.

What unsettled him most was just how *easy* it would be, to fall down that rabbit-hole. It was fringe, radical, a completely outlandish thought to even *entertain* pursuing... but there'd be no wait, no expense, no reliance on risky untested technology. It'd be so easy just to dangle his feet off the edge. To shine a light down the hole, just to see how deep it really goes.

And against his better instincts, Korekiyo could not ignore how the idea fascinated him. How acutely the possibility of naturally-attained eternal life appealed to some primal corner of his brain. That was the only way anyone had ever been roped into such a scheme, no doubt.

It might have remained a simple curiosity, under less dire circumstances. Something Korekiyo would observe from a distance and remark on passively and never, *ever* partake in himself.

But he was running out of options. Sister's life was at stake. In his hands. Korekiyo had promised her he'd do something—*anything*—to keep her alive.

Korekiyo picked up his pen, flipped to a new notebook page, and with a small, resigned nod began to write.

He had to try. He had no choice but to *try*.



This Shinguji character's a crafty bastard, whoever they are.

Shuichi's been trying to find more information on them for almost two days straight—combing through every search engine and database he has access to—and all he has to show for it are a college enrollment record and a couple of old anthropology papers. Enough to confirm they're a real person that exists, and very little else. No connection to any kind of immortality cult—nothing more recent than three or four years ago, even. He still has next to no idea who his anonymous client might be in relation to this whole affair, or what they could even mean by an obsession with immortality. Either this tip is a complete goose chase, or Shinguji's covered their tracks well.

What Shuichi *has* found out is where the letter's meeting-place coordinates lead: the middle of a forest. Suspicious. Unsurprising, honestly.

He's coming up on a choice. The day of this group's supposed meeting draws near, and so does the due date for Shuichi's rent. Either he takes the bait and potentially compromises his own safety, or he swallows a few late fees and—potentially—compromises the safety of a bunch of brainwashed innocents. Sits on the sidelines and lets a crazed immortality-hungry zealot run free, with the knowledge that maybe, just maybe, he could've done something to stop them.

Before he knows it, Shuichi's digging through his closet for that old green peacoat of his, every possible justification and reassurance he can think of carouseling through his head.

He'll bring a weapon. He'll tell Kaede and Maki where he's going. He'll keep his wits about him. He's braved more explicitly dangerous missions than this one. He's been doing this for years. He can handle himself.

He'll be fine.



There were lilacs and tansies in the small white vase on the day Sister's body died.

Korekiyo was there; of course he was. There to hold her hand, feel the second it went permanently, unnervingly limp. There to watch her sickly-yellow eyes slip shut for the very last time. There to hear Sister's last words, words she'd said to him a thousand times in the past two months: *I don't want to die.*

The flowers were already starting to droop. Korekiyo had brought them in just this morning. The room reeked of rosemary and thyme, uplifting, invigorating. Unfitting.

This was a failure on Korekiyo's part. The instant Sister's fluttering pulse finally gave up its ghost, Korekiyo knew he'd failed. Failed to save Sister's life, to give her the help he'd promised. The help she'd so desperately needed from him.

Korekiyo did not weep at her passing. In truth, he was a bit preoccupied, wondering if this was really the end. If there was truly nothing more he could do to salvage this.

After all, Korekiyo was still alive, was he not? He still had hands with which to do Sister's bidding, a tongue with which she could speak. Who was to say that Sister could not live on through him?

And if, one day, he *did* unlock the secret to living forever... then Sister could live forever too.

Even if he couldn't keep Sister's heart beating, then, it might be premature of him to give up while his own heart still marched on.

The hospital staff would be in very soon, to discuss what would come next, to take Sister's body away from Korekiyo. But they had no way of taking away

her spirit, the part of her that mattered most. The only part of her, now, that might yet live.

“Sister,” Korekiyo breathed, drawing sharp incensed air into his lungs, looking once more to the lilacs and tansies that hung heavy with the weight of death.

“I swear to you, I’ll bring you back.”



Alone, the fact that the letter’s designated meeting time is in the dead of night doesn’t particularly faze Shuichi. But paired with the fact that it’s brought him out to unfamiliar woods an hour’s drive away—when he doesn’t even have something as simple as light on his side—it does absolutely nothing to calm his nerves either. Never mind the fact that he still has no real clue what he’s decided to get himself into.

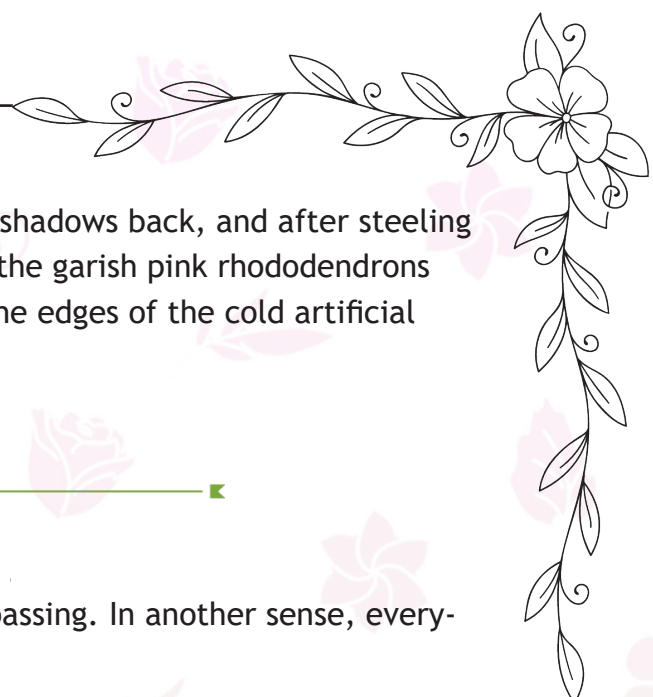
He stays in his car as long as he possibly can, until the unmarked dirt path he’s been driving on becomes too narrow for comfort, until the wiry bushes and tree branches threaten to scrape his side-view mirrors. He leaves *just* enough room to swing the little two-door sedan around until it’s facing the way he came, in case a quick escape is in order.

Shuichi’s boots hit the dirt path with a dry, almost gravelly crunch. It’s a very dry night, any hint of morning dew still several hours away, and a little too warm for Shuichi’s woolen peacoat. Even so, he has to fight to keep from shivering.

According to his cellphone, the end of this path just about marks where his destination lies. All he has to do is keep going. On foot.

Shuichi pats down his pockets one more time, inhales deeply, picks up the faintest note of something strange in the air. Smoke. No, sharper than that—incense?

Briefly he pauses, strains his ears for any suspicious noise, stares down the deep midnight shadows that lie ahead as if they might come alive. They don’t, except for a slight shift with a downwind breeze. The incense smell grows a bit stronger.



Shuichi flicks on his flashlight to chase the shadows back, and after steeling himself as best he can—only passively noting the garish pink rhododendrons dotting the fringes of the path, catching on the edges of the cold artificial light—he ventures further in.

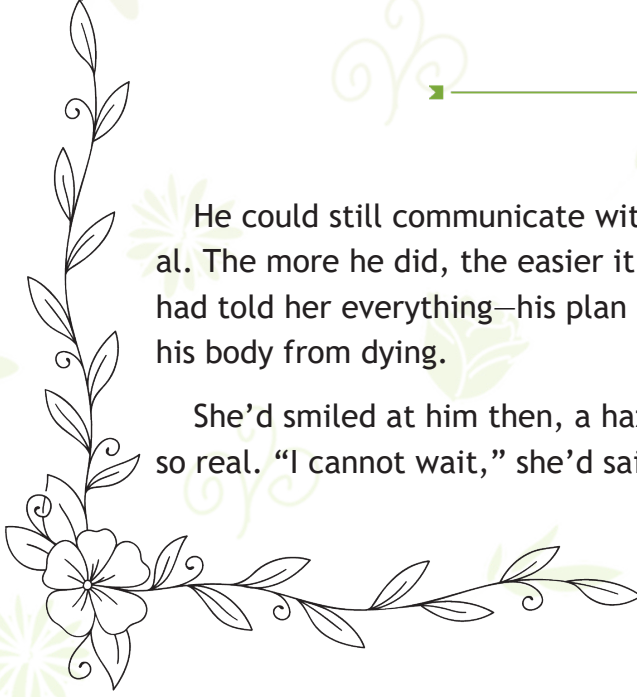


In a sense, nothing changed after Sister's passing. In another sense, everything changed.

Of course, there were no more hospital visits. No more nights spent in fitful sleep on a plasticky couch, no more soft eyes and sad smiles from nurses whose faces had grown unbearably familiar, no more constant cacophony of beeps and chimes and forlorn sobs. No more wilting flowers. No more death.

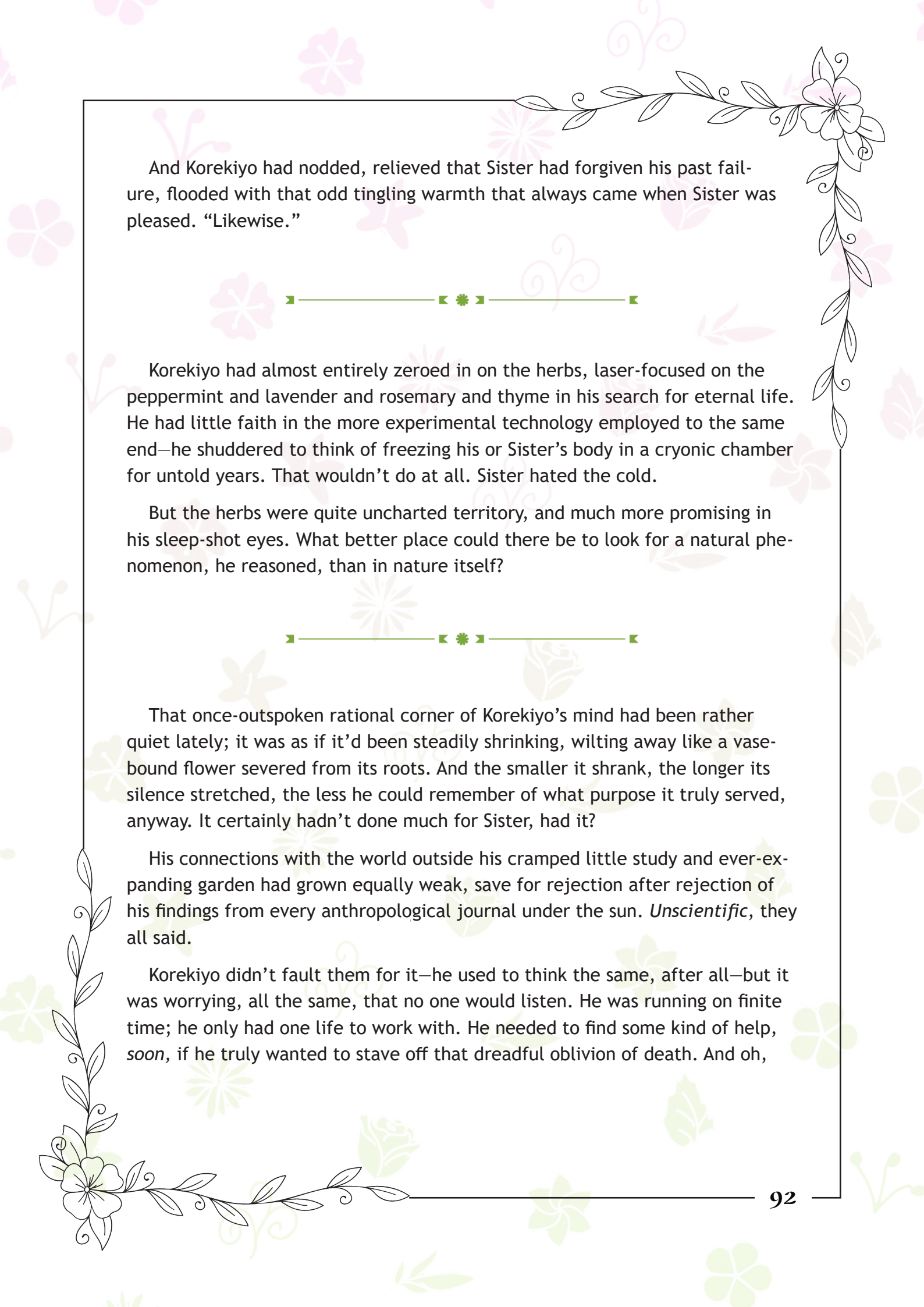
But Sister never truly left. Korekiyo could still feel her near, watching over him, peering over his shoulder during the hours-long research sessions that had only grown more intense. Now that he had nowhere else to be, he was free to shut himself up in his study as long and as often as he wished. To pick up where he left off, as it were.

Korekiyo had failed to save Sister in the physical sense; this he knew full well. Had he more time, perhaps, he could've succeeded. Could've found a way to delay or destroy the inevitable. But there was no use dwelling on mistakes already made. He'd jumped down the rabbit-hole and long since lost track of which way was up. All he could do now was keep falling.




He could still communicate with Sister, he'd found, through séance and ritual. The more he did, the easier it became, and the longer she stayed. Korekiyo had told her everything—his plan for her to inherit his body, and then to stop his body from dying.

She'd smiled at him then, a hazy apparition that at the same time had been so real. "I cannot wait," she'd said, "to reunite with you forever, Korekiyo."




And Korekiyo had nodded, relieved that Sister had forgiven his past failure, flooded with that odd tingling warmth that always came when Sister was pleased. “Likewise.”



Korekiyo had almost entirely zeroed in on the herbs, laser-focused on the peppermint and lavender and rosemary and thyme in his search for eternal life. He had little faith in the more experimental technology employed to the same end—he shuddered to think of freezing his or Sister’s body in a cryonic chamber for untold years. That wouldn’t do at all. Sister hated the cold.

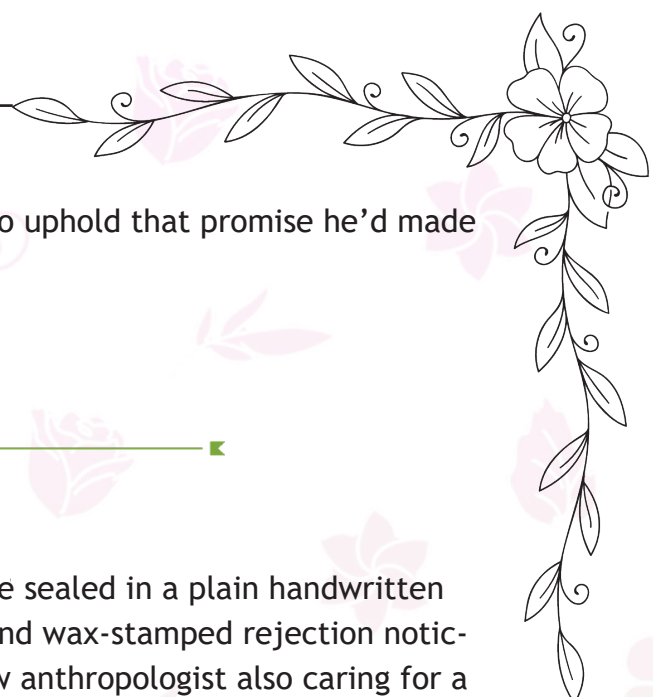
But the herbs were quite uncharted territory, and much more promising in his sleep-shot eyes. What better place could there be to look for a natural phenomenon, he reasoned, than in nature itself?



That once-outspoken rational corner of Korekiyo’s mind had been rather quiet lately; it was as if it’d been steadily shrinking, wilting away like a vase-bound flower severed from its roots. And the smaller it shrank, the longer its silence stretched, the less he could remember of what purpose it truly served, anyway. It certainly hadn’t done much for Sister, had it?

His connections with the world outside his cramped little study and ever-expanding garden had grown equally weak, save for rejection after rejection of his findings from every anthropological journal under the sun. *Unscientific*, they all said.

Korekiyo didn’t fault them for it—he used to think the same, after all—but it was worrying, all the same, that no one would listen. He was running on finite time; he only had one life to work with. He needed to find some kind of help, *soon*, if he truly wanted to stave off that dreadful oblivion of death. And oh,



how he wanted to. He'd do anything it took to uphold that promise he'd made what felt like an eternity ago.

Indeed, it was all he had left.



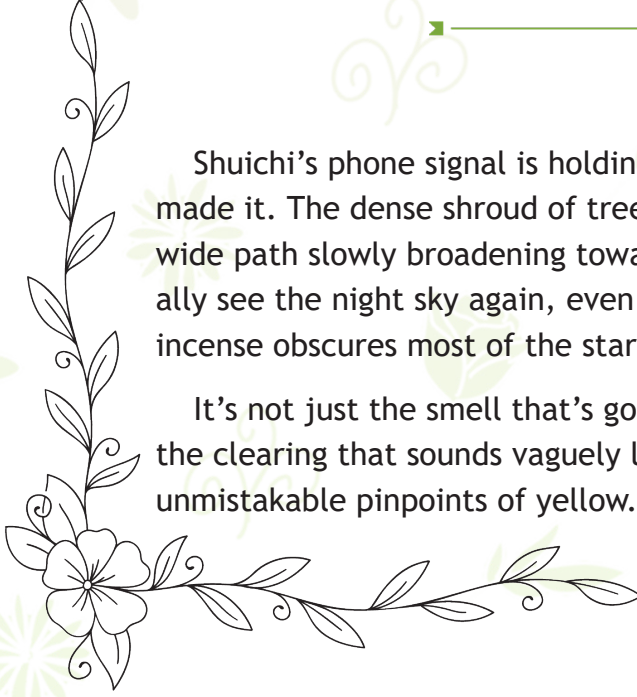
The answer to his prayer, at long last, came sealed in a plain handwritten letter amid the usual bundle of newsletters and wax-stamped rejection notices. A plea for more information, from a fellow anthropologist also caring for a sick loved one.

Please, it said, if you find anything new, keep me abreast of it. If there's anything at all that has even a chance of helping, I'll try it. I've tried everything. I'm desperate.

Only upon reading those words did it dawn on Korekiyo that he didn't need journalistic recognition to spread the word of his research. He never did. He could take this to the grassroots, sow the seeds in those just like him. Of course—it was so *obvious*.

He clutched the letter tighter, his irrefutable proof that he had not yet struck a dead end, had yet farther down the rabbit-hole to fall.

For if there was one person willing to heed his call...then undoubtedly there would be more.



Shuichi's phone signal is holding on for dear life, but it seems he's almost made it. The dense shroud of trees has finally started to thin, the one-person-wide path slowly broadening toward a crude clearing of sorts. Shuichi can actually see the night sky again, even if the now-suffocating cloud of what *has* to be incense obscures most of the stars.

It's not just the smell that's gotten stronger. There's a low noise coming from the clearing that sounds vaguely like murmuring voices. Light, too—faint but unmistakable pinpoints of yellow. Candles. Barely bright enough to cut through



the pungent haze and illuminate the features of their...ah, of their subjects.

Well, the letter wasn't lying about the rendezvous.

Shuichi's on the very cusp of the clearing, and not thirty feet away is a sight he can't even hope to make heads or tails of. There's a ring of hooded figures robed in green, at least a dozen in number, their faces hidden behind beaked masks reminiscent of old-timey plague doctors. Each one is holding a candle and chanting under their breaths—some sort of prayer, possibly. Latin, maybe.

Shuichi thinks to click off his flashlight a split second too late.

All of a sudden the chanting stops, silenced by the raised hand of the tall, slender figure at the helm. They're the only one not holding a candle; instead they're swinging an incense burner back and forth, as slow and even as a grandfather clock's pendulum. They don't have a beak, either, just an opaque veil covering their nose and mouth. When they turn to face Shuichi, their tansy-colored eyes pierce straight through his own.

"Ah," they breathe. "We have a visitor."

They step toward Shuichi, right in time with the pendulum swing, crushing a few of the countless lilacs and violets strewn underfoot. The rest of the circle remains unbroken, the beaked figures turning in place to face the new arrival. Shuichi doesn't move, unwilling to step forward, unable to step back.

"You are wearing our color," the incense-bearer (*could this be Shinguji?*) tilts, nodding to Shuichi's ivy-hued peacoat. Their eyes light up with some warped understanding, with their own lurid glow. "You seek to join us, then?"

"N-No," Shuichi stammers after a moment, forcing his gaze up from the swinging burner. The smell of it is overwhelming this close up, but even so it can't quite mask the whiff of cold peppermint Shinguji carries with them—along with something else, buried even deeper beneath that. Something rotten.

Shinguji tilts their head, a silent question.

"I—" Shuichi clears his throat, plants his feet, flashes his badge. "My name is Shuichi Saihara. I have a few questions for you."

It's unsettling—nothing about Shinguji outright suggests they mean physical harm, but it's so difficult to get *any* kind of read on them with so much of themselves covered, veiled by cloth and incense and darkness. Even their hands are wrapped in bandages, like a mummy's. The longer Shuichi stares at Shingu-

ji, the more they look like a dreamt-up phantom than anything concrete, rooted in reality.

“Saihara.” They nod, thin brows lifting a touch. “You wish to know more. Yes, of course. I’d be happy to explain everything to you.”

A simple forward sweep of their hand, and before Shuichi can blink he’s surrounded on all sides by the beaked figures. They close in on him, goad his footsteps toward Shinguji, trampling violets and stumbling over lilac blossoms. He gasps in a lungful of incense; his chest burns with rosemary and thyme.

Shinguji’s face is inches from his own, their long, dark hair tunneling his vision and train of thought. The weapon in his pocket is long forgotten, as distant a memory as his car, his office, his life outside of this very instant. Shuichi’s eyes water under the plumes of smoke, under the smoldering scrutiny of twin tansy fields, under the dizzying odor of peppermint and rot.

Belatedly he recognizes that rot, and wonders how he didn’t earlier. He’s smelled it a million times before. Every detective has.

It’s the smell of death.

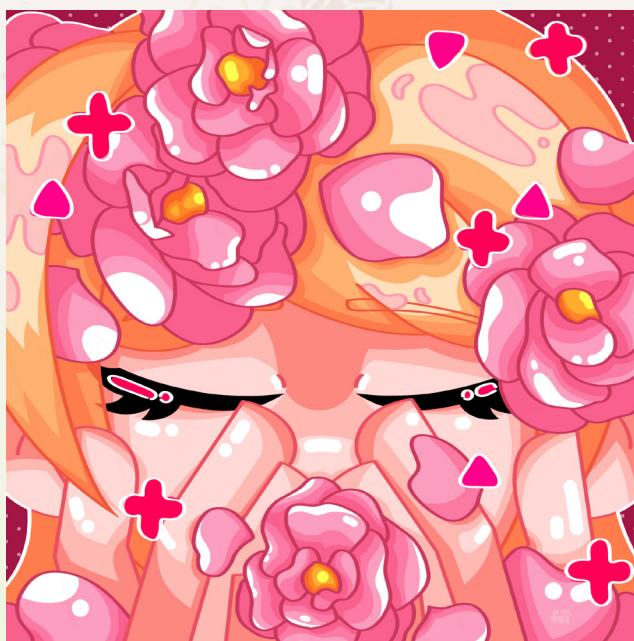
“Tell me, Saihara,” Shinguji singsongs, their voice climbing in pitch—sickeningly sweet, as if in mimicry of a woman. They lean in ever closer, inches of distance shrinking to millimeters, their eyes crinkling with a hidden smile.

“How would you like to live forever?”



Icons

By Fei









toward the sun

By Ko

Maybe it's being in a hospital—being in that environment that leaves Komaeda with a bitter taste in his mouth. Or, maybe, it's the reality of their situation dawning on him, a slow, agonizing pressure that's beginning to crush him minute by minute.

The air tastes of disinfectant and a sterile nothingness—an empty, liminal feeling he's always hated about hospitals. It doesn't help that this one is technically abandoned, even if it's been cleaned up and taken care of by Future Foundation in anticipation of their stay here.

The initial surprise, and overall warm feeling that had filled him upon waking was starting to fade—it's difficult already, piecing together memories from the real world and the digital, and trying to make sense of just *who* exactly he, and all his classmates, are. Including Hinata.

“Are you feeling better today?”

Hinata's at his bedside, even as Komaeda's gaze drifts far off, visibly sinking into his own dark thoughts.

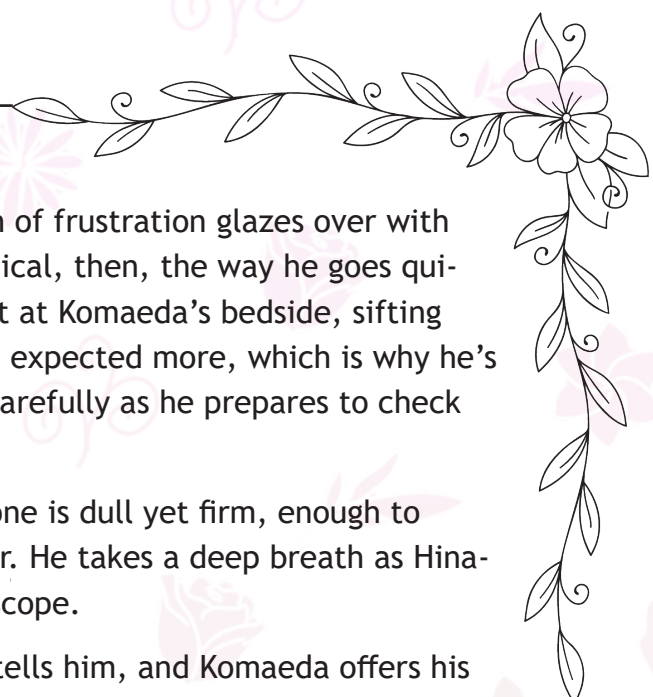
“...Mm,” Komaeda hums noncommittally, blinking a few times as he tries to dig out of his head enough to respond. Does he feel better? Not really. Worse, in fact. “Do you really need to worry over me like this, Hinata-kun? Shouldn't the *Ultimate Hope* spend his time on something more important?” His voice is sharp suddenly, like thorns in Hinata's palm.

“No,” Hinata's patience already wanes, but he keeps his voice firm. “This is important. I choose what I do with my time, and I'm choosing to make sure you're okay.”

“A waste of time,” Komaeda answers coolly. “Don't you know I'm broken beyond repair? Fundamentally corrupt.”

Hinata takes a deep breath. “That's not true—”

“So if you want a pet project to *fix*, you should go for someone else.”



Hinata's patience snaps, and his expression of frustration glazes over with a look of overwhelming boredom. It's methodical, then, the way he goes quiet and turns to the tray of medical equipment at Komaeda's bedside, sifting through everything he'd brought in. Komaeda expected more, which is why he's similarly stunned silent, watching the other carefully as he prepares to check his vitals.

"Breathe," Hinata instructs him, and his tone is dull yet firm, enough to keep Komaeda from wanting to fight it further. He takes a deep breath as Hinata's hand sits at his lower back with a stethoscope.

Then he's done. "Give me your hand," he tells him, and Komaeda offers his good one, looking away as Hinata checks his blood pressure. It's all very standard doctor stuff; for a moment, Komaeda feels as if he's back in a much more normal time, before society collapsed, in a stuffy doctor's office for his routine check-ups.

By the time he's done, they're both dead quiet, until Hinata speaks up again. "Your other hand," he tells him, and Komaeda pauses.

"...Why?"

"I need to assess its state. It's a wound, Komaeda."

It stings. Komaeda hesitates, but ultimately raises his hand—limp, mangled, rotting—from where it's tucked beneath the hospital blanket across his lap, and holds it out to Hinata. Lets him unwind the bandages as he hangs his head in shame, not even wanting to look at it himself. The other man's fingers brush over the poorly done stitching, and the pain is so dull and long gone by now that it's barely a whisper; he turns his wrist in his hand to expect it - unevenly chopped, the flesh blooming in shades of red and purple where the stitches sink into it, and mostly untreated.

Hinata's aware of it, had been aware of it, and had done what was necessary in the past to keep it from killing him, despite his apathy. A part of him had always despised it, found it grotesque and difficult to look at, despite the fact that he'd been scientifically engineered to *not* feel those things. It always angered him, but not enough to get him to *do* something about it.

Now, though, Hinata's *irate*. He hates it, hates knowing that *she* had a hold on Komaeda in any capacity, that even now, despite everything, she's influencing him to such a degree. Can see it in how Komaeda's shoulders tense and pull

together, putting prominence on his sharp collarbones, skinny and frail. The way his head hangs low, messy white hair obscuring his face, shame dripping off of him. An effect she had on him, too, even if Hinata - or Kamukura, rather - had never wanted to admit it.

And maybe there's jealousy, too, something he won't admit, and perhaps it had always been there. Knowing Komaeda had such strong feelings for her, even if they had been manipulated and construed, and that those feelings had certainly been misplaced.

After a moment, Hinata lets go, and turns to leave. "I'll be back later for your medication and physical therapy," he tells him, and pauses. "...But these should help, with the state your mind's in, being alone in here."

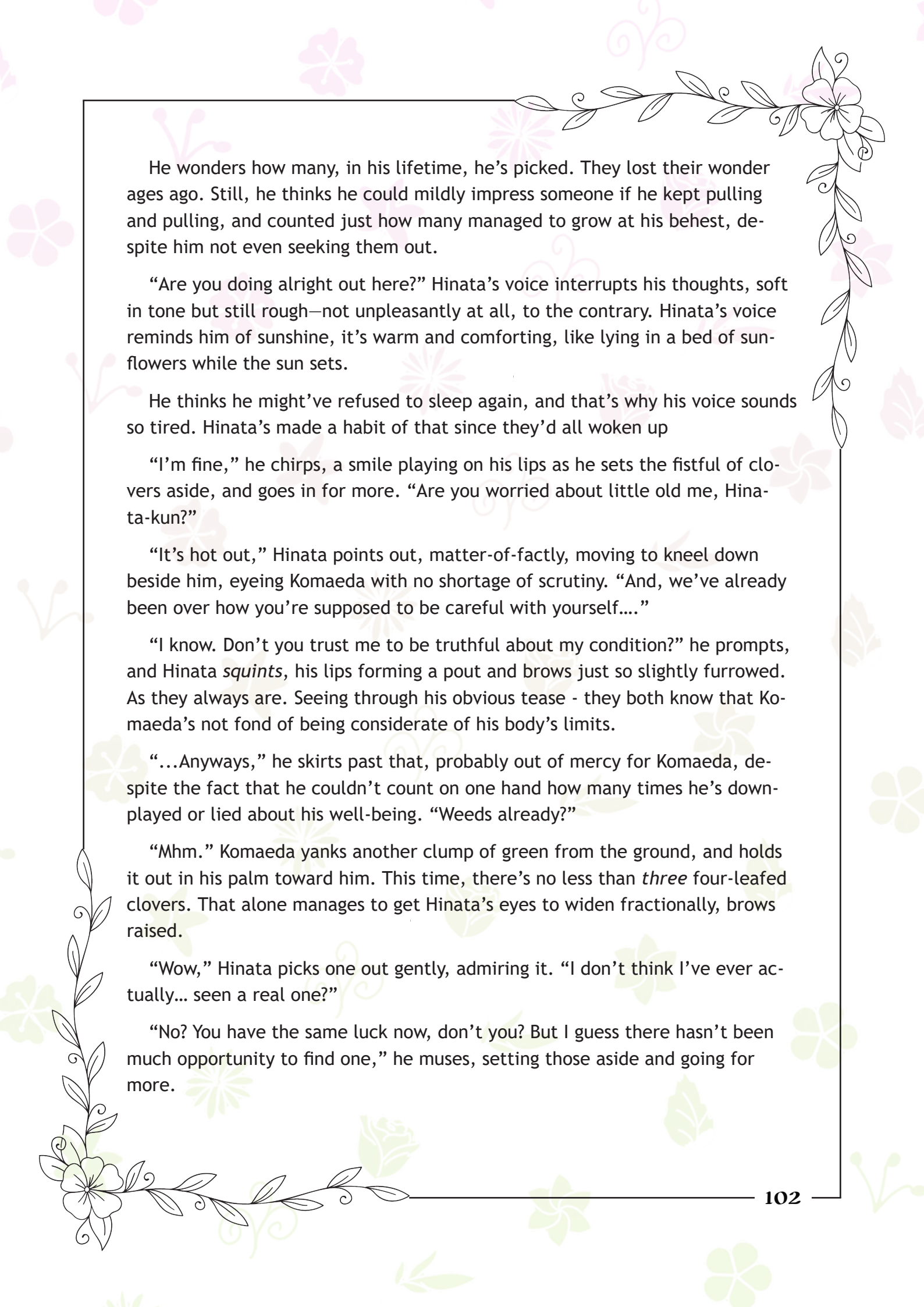
Before Hinata leaves, he presents Komaeda with a small pot of lavender, setting it near his bedside. It's cheesy, and Hinata seems aware of that as he tries to dodge eye contact as he does so, muttering a quiet goodbye as he departs. But. Komaeda silently appreciates it. He *has* always liked pretty things.



It's humid; Komaeda can feel the sweat clinging to his forehead and back, making his thin t-shirt stick to his skin. The earthy smell of dirt fills his senses as he kneels in the garden bed, surrounded by newly planted seeds slowly beginning to sprout. With a heavy sigh, he reaches behind himself to tie his hair in a loose ponytail at his neck, the thick, white curls no longer crowding him and making the heat all that much more unbearable.

There's weeds growing already. Of course, it's just his luck. More amusing is that the weeds are clovers - sprouting up in tiny green clumps with small, white, pink-tinged flowers. This won't do. If he wants to actually succeed at this job he's been entrusted with, he'll have to give the plants space to grow and flourish. Pesky weeds will get in the way of that, no doubt.

Komaeda buries his hand into the green foliage and takes a fistful of the clovers and *pulls*, the roots coming loose and unearthing the spindly, weak clusters from the dirt. It stains his hands, having forgotten to bring any gloves, and when he opens them, he finds a cluster of clovers in his palm—atop them sits a single four-leaf clover.



He wonders how many, in his lifetime, he's picked. They lost their wonder ages ago. Still, he thinks he could mildly impress someone if he kept pulling and pulling, and counted just how many managed to grow at his behest, despite him not even seeking them out.

"Are you doing alright out here?" Hinata's voice interrupts his thoughts, soft in tone but still rough—not unpleasantly at all, to the contrary. Hinata's voice reminds him of sunshine, it's warm and comforting, like lying in a bed of sunflowers while the sun sets.

He thinks he might've refused to sleep again, and that's why his voice sounds so tired. Hinata's made a habit of that since they'd all woken up

"I'm fine," he chirps, a smile playing on his lips as he sets the fistful of clovers aside, and goes in for more. "Are you worried about little old me, Hinata-kun?"

"It's hot out," Hinata points out, matter-of-factly, moving to kneel down beside him, eyeing Komaeda with no shortage of scrutiny. "And, we've already been over how you're supposed to be careful with yourself...."

"I know. Don't you trust me to be truthful about my condition?" he prompts, and Hinata *squints*, his lips forming a pout and brows just so slightly furrowed. As they always are. Seeing through his obvious tease - they both know that Komaeda's not fond of being considerate of his body's limits.

"...Anyways," he skirts past that, probably out of mercy for Komaeda, despite the fact that he couldn't count on one hand how many times he's downplayed or lied about his well-being. "Weeds already?"

"Mhm." Komaeda yanks another clump of green from the ground, and holds it out in his palm toward him. This time, there's no less than *three* four-leafed clovers. That alone manages to get Hinata's eyes to widen fractionally, brows raised.

"Wow," Hinata picks one out gently, admiring it. "I don't think I've ever actually... seen a real one?"

"No? You have the same luck now, don't you? But I guess there hasn't been much opportunity to find one," he muses, setting those aside and going for more.

Hinata shrugs. "I don't think that... I would've been looking for clovers, for any reason. But it's still cool... you found a *lot*," he points out, emphatically. "That's really rare."

"And yet they're pesky weeds," he complains, tossing them aside carelessly; four leaves or three, they're all the same to him at this point. Things to be rid of. "I'm not impressed by them anymore."

There's a brief silence where he can feel Hinata's eyes on him, watching him as he keeps pulling and grasping at foliage, tearing it from the dirt and making a mess as he works to clean up the garden. "Well," he eventually starts, picking a few more. "I think we should keep them."

"...Don't you have an *Ultimate Gardener* talent? You're not supposed to keep weeds," Komaeda teases.

"N-No, I meant... After you pull them, couldn't we... press them? Or something like that," he suggests. "I mean, it's just nice to keep memories like that. Especially lucky ones."

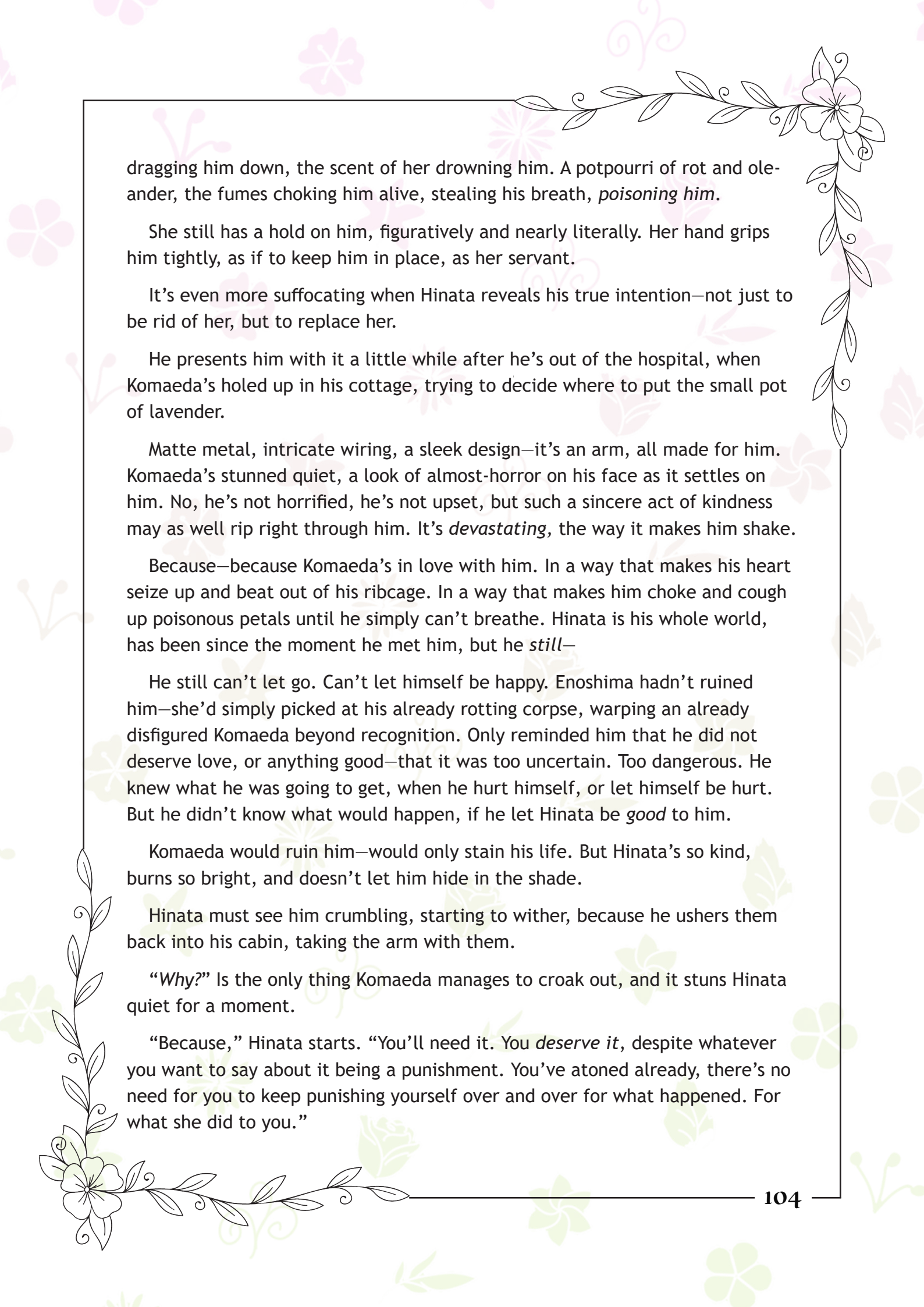
The luckster hums thoughtfully, digging his hand into the fragile bed of clovers once more, but instead of pulling harshly, he gently runs his fingers across the foliage. "...If Hinata-kun wants to," he finally answers. "I don't see why not."



The hand rots at his body. Hinata wants to remove it, naturally - it's going to pick him apart eventually, whether it be mentally or physically, its presence is outright harmful. A *virus*—a very literal and physical image of the despair she'd rooted in his brain, like poisonous weeds and thorns splintering through the crevices of his mind.

But the thought—just the *suggestion* that he be rid of her, is enough to make him seize up. It's senseless, he *knows* it's bad for him, knows that he despises it, that he can't even *look at it*, and yet.

He's bitter about the thought of parting with it. Despite the sight of it being enough to make him spiral, to make his mind feel like it's being pulled back into the haze she'd dragged him under, enough to feel her nails on his skin



dragging him down, the scent of her drowning him. A potpourri of rot and oleander, the fumes choking him alive, stealing his breath, *poisoning him*.

She still has a hold on him, figuratively and nearly literally. Her hand grips him tightly, as if to keep him in place, as her servant.

It's even more suffocating when Hinata reveals his true intention—not just to be rid of her, but to replace her.

He presents him with it a little while after he's out of the hospital, when Komaeda's holed up in his cottage, trying to decide where to put the small pot of lavender.

Matte metal, intricate wiring, a sleek design—it's an arm, all made for him. Komaeda's stunned quiet, a look of almost-horror on his face as it settles on him. No, he's not horrified, he's not upset, but such a sincere act of kindness may as well rip right through him. It's *devastating*, the way it makes him shake.

Because—because Komaeda's in love with him. In a way that makes his heart seize up and beat out of his ribcage. In a way that makes him choke and cough up poisonous petals until he simply can't breathe. Hinata is his whole world, has been since the moment he met him, but he *still*—


He still can't let go. Can't let himself be happy. Enoshima hadn't ruined him—she'd simply picked at his already rotting corpse, warping an already disfigured Komaeda beyond recognition. Only reminded him that he did not deserve love, or anything good—that it was too uncertain. Too dangerous. He knew what he was going to get, when he hurt himself, or let himself be hurt. But he didn't know what would happen, if he let Hinata be *good* to him.

Komaeda would ruin him—would only stain his life. But Hinata's so kind, burns so bright, and doesn't let him hide in the shade.

Hinata must see him crumbling, starting to wither, because he ushers them back into his cabin, taking the arm with them.

“Why?” Is the only thing Komaeda manages to croak out, and it stuns Hinata quiet for a moment.

“Because,” Hinata starts. “You’ll need it. You *deserve it*, despite whatever you want to say about it being a punishment. You’ve atoned already, there’s no need for you to keep punishing yourself over and over for what happened. For what she did to you.”



“...I thought they’d be pretty to put in my cabin. But I was picking a few flowers, to see if anyone else wanted any....” Komaeda trails off, worrying at his lip as he glances at the basket beside him, currently stacked with a few different freshly picked flowers. Hinata’s sure an Ultimate Florist sits somewhere in his head, as he notes the bundles of lavender strung up in the small basket at Komaeda’s hip.

“I think I’d like some,” Hinata blurts out, though he’s a bit more sure of his words than most things he tends to say around the man. “...If you want to give me some. I kinda like sunflowers, honestly.”

Komaeda’s trowel digs itself into the dirt around one of the smaller sunflowers—a dwarf sunflower, there’s a small row of them hidden within the large, looming field of them—until he’s able to get beneath the root and scoop it out of the ground. Carefully, Komaeda places it in a tiny pot between his thighs, until it’s sitting nice and pretty inside.

He picks the pot up, and holds it out to Hinata with a bright smile, and the softest flush across his cheeks. Maybe from the heat, or maybe something else, if Hinata’s thinking wishfully.

“Then, this one is for Hinata-kun!” he announces. Hinata gives the tiniest, awkward laugh as he gingerly takes the pot. “The first one I’ve picked. It’s only fitting it goes to you, I think.”

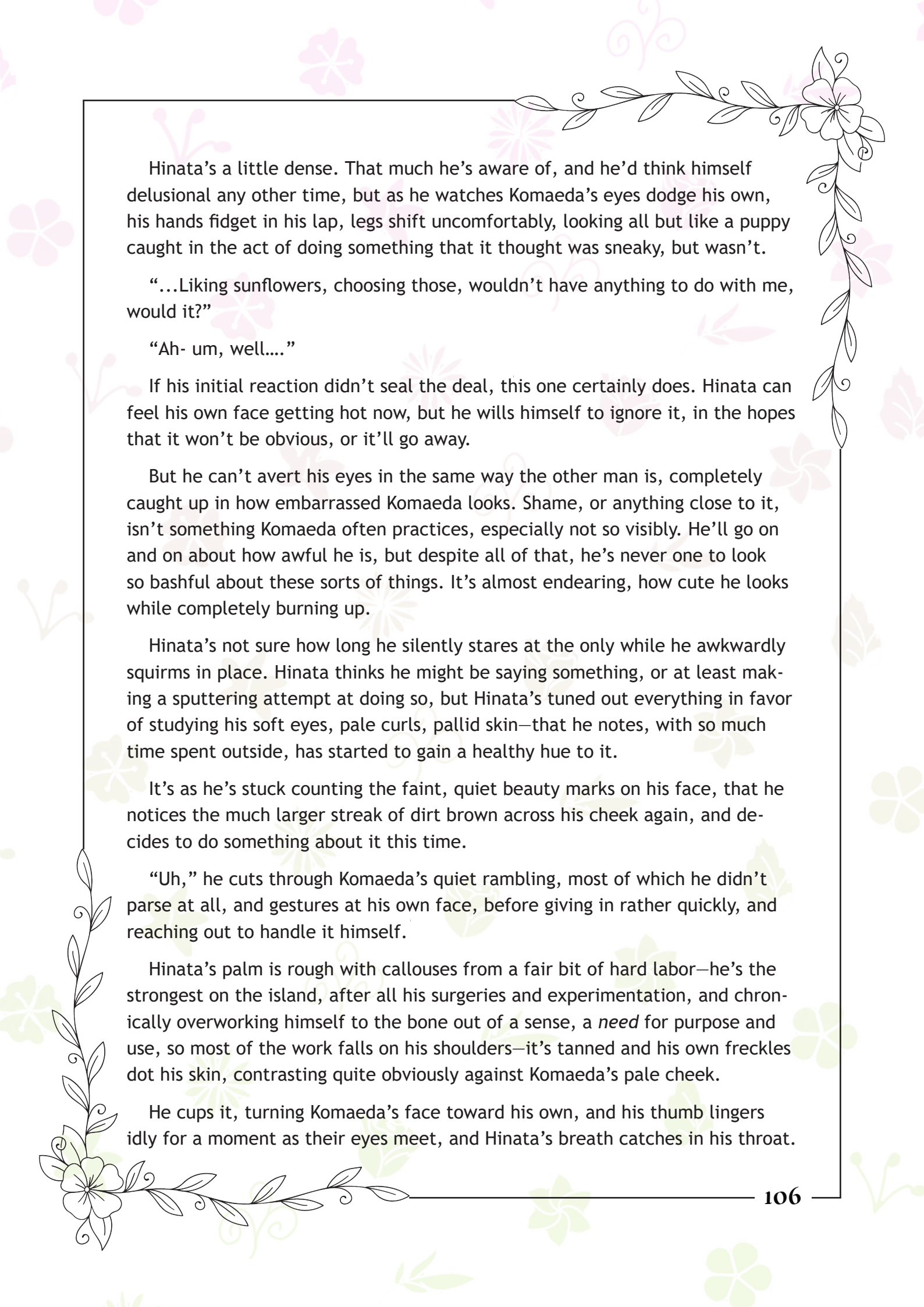
“...Thanks,” Hinata’s voice is sheepish now, low and quiet, but he means it wholeheartedly. He holds the pot up to inspect it, noticing a scrawling of sloppy kanji across the front; “*sunflower.*”

“I really like sunflowers. They’re so hopeful,” Komaeda’s voice begins to fill the silence as Hinata’s attention stays fixed on the pot. “Always facing toward the sun. The future,” he hums. “It’s an inspiring flower, I think. And they’re very pretty.”

The silence looms over them for a minute as Hinata ponders something, and comes to a realization.

“Hey,” Hinata sets the pot on his lap and holds it up with one arm. He traces one finger across the kanji. “These are the first two kanji in my name.”

“...Oh,” Komaeda initially responds. Hinata swears he can see his face go even brighter, a reddish pink hue burning up to the tips of his ears.



Hinata's a little dense. That much he's aware of, and he'd think himself delusional any other time, but as he watches Komaeda's eyes dodge his own, his hands fidget in his lap, legs shift uncomfortably, looking all but like a puppy caught in the act of doing something that it thought was sneaky, but wasn't.

"...Liking sunflowers, choosing those, wouldn't have anything to do with me, would it?"

"Ah- um, well...."

If his initial reaction didn't seal the deal, this one certainly does. Hinata can feel his own face getting hot now, but he wills himself to ignore it, in the hopes that it won't be obvious, or it'll go away.

But he can't avert his eyes in the same way the other man is, completely caught up in how embarrassed Komaeda looks. Shame, or anything close to it, isn't something Komaeda often practices, especially not so visibly. He'll go on and on about how awful he is, but despite all of that, he's never one to look so bashful about these sorts of things. It's almost endearing, how cute he looks while completely burning up.

Hinata's not sure how long he silently stares at the only while he awkwardly squirms in place. Hinata thinks he might be saying something, or at least making a sputtering attempt at doing so, but Hinata's tuned out everything in favor of studying his soft eyes, pale curls, pallid skin—that he notes, with so much time spent outside, has started to gain a healthy hue to it.

It's as he's stuck counting the faint, quiet beauty marks on his face, that he notices the much larger streak of dirt brown across his cheek again, and decides to do something about it this time.

"Uh," he cuts through Komaeda's quiet rambling, most of which he didn't parse at all, and gestures at his own face, before giving in rather quickly, and reaching out to handle it himself.

Hinata's palm is rough with callouses from a fair bit of hard labor—he's the strongest on the island, after all his surgeries and experimentation, and chronically overworking himself to the bone out of a sense, a *need* for purpose and use, so most of the work falls on his shoulders—it's tanned and his own freckles dot his skin, contrasting quite obviously against Komaeda's pale cheek.

He cups it, turning Komaeda's face toward his own, and his thumb lingers idly for a moment as their eyes meet, and Hinata's breath catches in his throat.

A laugh tumbles out of Komaeda's chest. "You're *still* wasting your time, your talent, on someone like *me*?" he wheezes, hugging himself with his one hand, digging blunt fingernails into his skin. "*I don't get it.*"

"What is there to get, Komaeda? I care about you. You're not going to stop me from feeling that way," Hinata sounds exhausted to repeat it, but his voice is still firm. "It's not a waste if it's what *I* want. Unless you're going to try and tell me that you know what's best for me, and my 'talents'?"

Komaeda's quiet, pursed lips, staring at him with wide eyes.

"You can deny it, if you want. I'm not going to force you to accept it. I-I didn't even tell you I was making it, so I'll understand if that's what you do, but-" he sighs, so heavy that it drags his shoulders down. "It doesn't change the fact that I did it, and I'm going to keep doing things for you. Even if you keep denying them. Even if you keep shutting me out. Because I want you to get better, Komaeda."

Once again, as if ashamed, Komaeda's head hangs low, at a loss for words. Hinata sighs again. "You can decide later. I won't make you now," he says, and moves to set the arm down on a table in Komaeda's room - it's then, that he realizes, a single potted plant of lavender sits square in the middle. Briefly, a smile twitches at the corner of his lip; it's been a while since he's done that, it feels foreign. "Just tell me if you do, because we'll need to do some tests with it. Okay?"

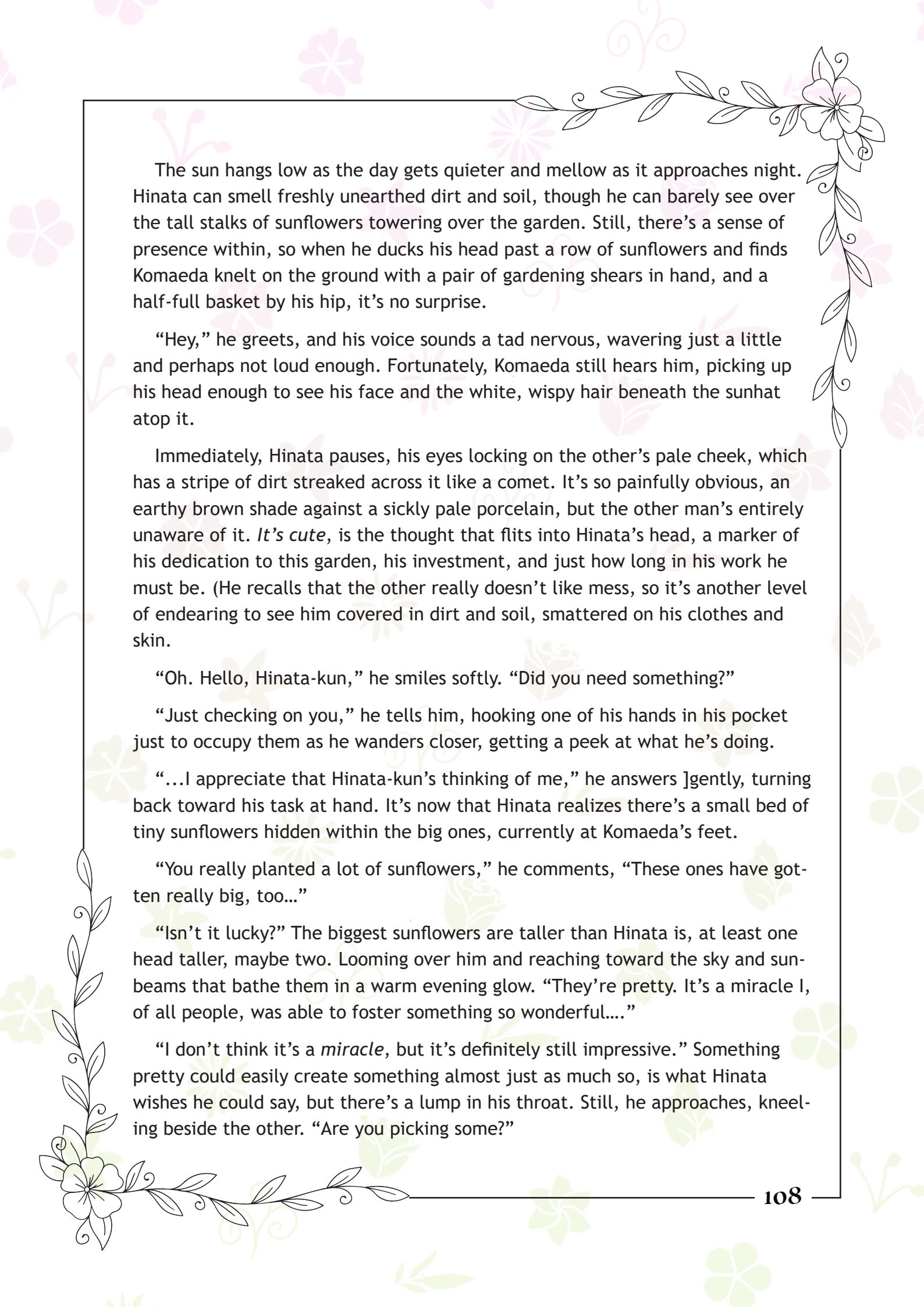
Komaeda's still quiet. But when Hinata looks at him, he nods.

Hinata rubs at his neck, starting to feel like the tension's actually going to have an effect on him, like Tsumiki warned. "...Okay. I'll leave you alone then."

"Ah-" Hinata stops when he hears the other's voice, sounding uncharacteristically small. "...I just want to go check on the garden, but after... I'll come see you, Hinata-kun."

For the second time since Komaeda woke up, Hinata *smiles*. Komaeda looks at him as if he's the sun. "...Okay. *Okay*. I'll see you later, Komaeda."





The sun hangs low as the day gets quieter and mellow as it approaches night. Hinata can smell freshly unearthed dirt and soil, though he can barely see over the tall stalks of sunflowers towering over the garden. Still, there's a sense of presence within, so when he ducks his head past a row of sunflowers and finds Komaeda knelt on the ground with a pair of gardening shears in hand, and a half-full basket by his hip, it's no surprise.

"Hey," he greets, and his voice sounds a tad nervous, wavering just a little and perhaps not loud enough. Fortunately, Komaeda still hears him, picking up his head enough to see his face and the white, wispy hair beneath the sunhat atop it.

Immediately, Hinata pauses, his eyes locking on the other's pale cheek, which has a stripe of dirt streaked across it like a comet. It's so painfully obvious, an earthy brown shade against a sickly pale porcelain, but the other man's entirely unaware of it. *It's cute*, is the thought that flits into Hinata's head, a marker of his dedication to this garden, his investment, and just how long in his work he must be. (He recalls that the other really doesn't like mess, so it's another level of endearing to see him covered in dirt and soil, smattered on his clothes and skin.

"Oh. Hello, Hinata-kun," he smiles softly. "Did you need something?"

"Just checking on you," he tells him, hooking one of his hands in his pocket just to occupy them as he wanders closer, getting a peek at what he's doing.

"...I appreciate that Hinata-kun's thinking of me," he answers gently, turning back toward his task at hand. It's now that Hinata realizes there's a small bed of tiny sunflowers hidden within the big ones, currently at Komaeda's feet.

"You really planted a lot of sunflowers," he comments, "These ones have gotten really big, too..."

"Isn't it lucky?" The biggest sunflowers are taller than Hinata is, at least one head taller, maybe two. Looming over him and reaching toward the sky and sunbeams that bathe them in a warm evening glow. "They're pretty. It's a miracle I, of all people, was able to foster something so wonderful...."

"I don't think it's a *miracle*, but it's definitely still impressive." Something pretty could easily create something almost just as much so, is what Hinata wishes he could say, but there's a lump in his throat. Still, he approaches, kneeling beside the other. "Are you picking some?"

It's like time stops, if only for a moment, before he reluctantly, and gently, swipes at the dirt on his cheek a few times until it's brushed off his skin.

"There," Hinata's voice feels caught in his throat, but he manages it out anyways, "I got it."

"Ah," Komaeda's just as out of breath, staring up at Hinata. "Th-thank you."

Hinata doesn't pull away, though; continuing to stare. "Uh." He's not sure where he's going with this, but his eyes wander downward in a way that's telling enough. "Can I-"

Komaeda makes a strange noise, like a quiet, flustered squeak. "I-"

And Hinata backpedals, starting to pull away. *Stupid*. He's really anything but smooth. "F-Forget it-"

In a sudden rush, Komaeda's robotic hand sinks into Hinata's tie, and pulls him forward, clumsily crashing their lips together in a way that knocks teeth against teeth, and nearly forehead against forehead. It's uncoordinated, and feverish, but Hinata's more than eager to melt into it once he realizes what's happening. Komaeda's a bit eager, and messy, but Hinata's not complaining, even if the way he practically bites at him and licks at his mouth is strange. In a good way, though.

It's over sooner than he'd like it to be, though, both of them parting to breathe. Komaeda's face is flushed an alarming amount, panting quietly and looking almost dizzy.

"Uh." Hinata's at a loss for words.

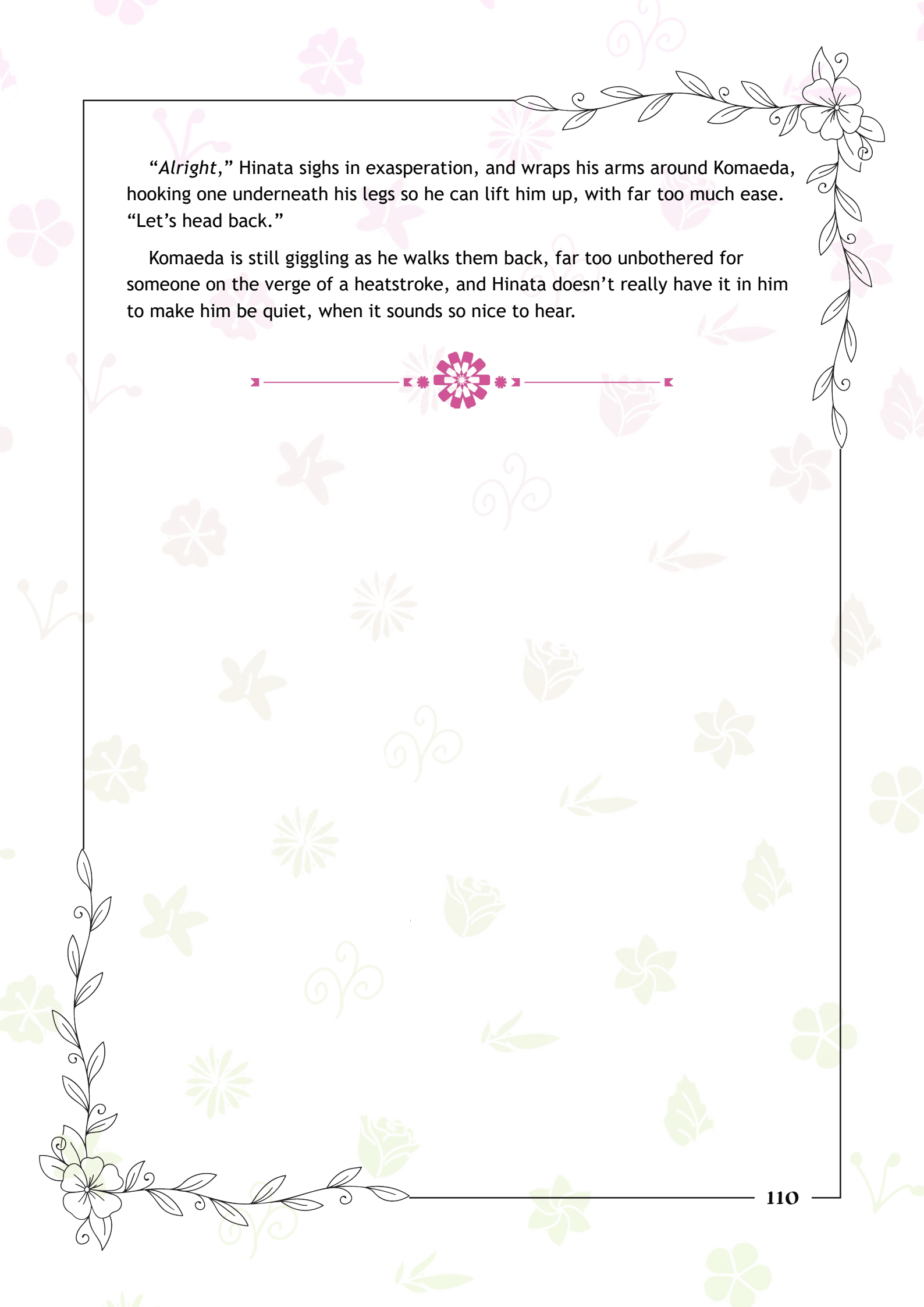
"Oh," Komaeda gasps, and he falls forward, his face tucking itself into Hinata's shoulder. He's pretty sure he can hear him giggling.

"Are you- okay...?" Hinata's hand travels up Komaeda's back, keeping him steady, before gently touching the back of his hand to his neck. *Burning up*. "You're overheating. Damnit, Komaeda, I told you...."

"I'm *fine*," Komaeda squeaks, though he's still all giggly, "It's - I'm just - ah, I think I'm... *happy*."

"You're also *too hot*. We should probably head back...."

"Mm, but I don't want to let go of Hinata-kun right now," Komaeda complains, "...and I think I feel a little dizzy."



“Alright,” Hinata sighs in exasperation, and wraps his arms around Komaeda, hooking one underneath his legs so he can lift him up, with far too much ease. “Let’s head back.”

Komaeda is still giggling as he walks them back, far too unbothered for someone on the verge of a heatstroke, and Hinata doesn’t really have it in him to make him be quiet, when it sounds so nice to hear.









Endings and New Beginnings

Written by ToxicPineapple | Art by Zipsunz

In the weeks following Kaito's graduation from Hope's Peak Academy, his every waking moment is spent preparing to go to space.

With more than just JAXA's formal training. There are a lot of loose ends Kaito needs to tie up before he can comfortably hop on a spaceship and be gone for the next six months. His grandparents are fussy by nature, which is great when he's feeling unloved, but... less so, when he's literally about to leave the planet. He's got sidekicks to attend to too—sidekicks who, for all their growth over the past three years, still need his support from time to time. Maki promises they'll be fine, and Kaito believes her, it's just that... he wants to see them as comfortable as possible before he leaves. He thinks that's understandable.

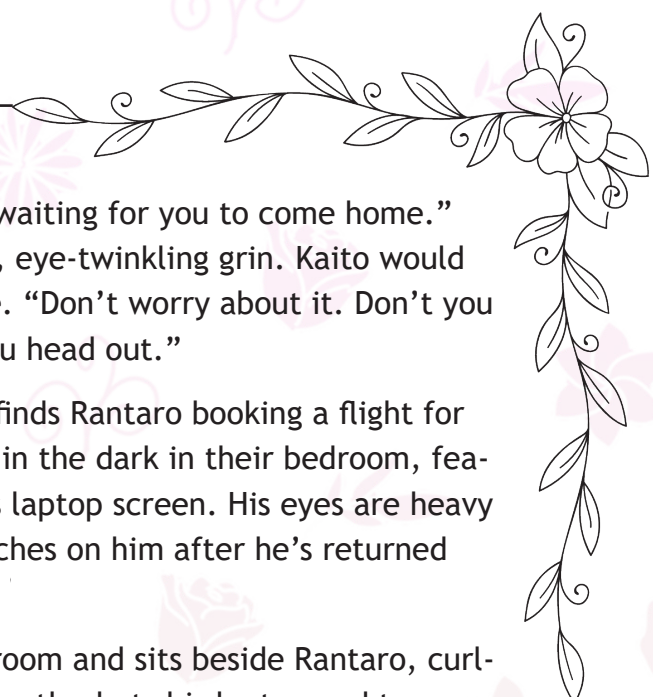
Between placating his folks, taking care of his sidekicks, and preparing with JAXA for the launch, Kaito is *unspeakably* busy. Rantaro takes to cooking dinner, and every evening Kaito comes home too beat to do much more than thank him for stepping up and pass out against his chest. It's nice to have the space to even just *do* that with somebody, with all the obligations he has to attend to right now... but he knows that there's one final thing he hasn't dealt with.

The only problem is... Rantaro is good as hell at dodging the conversation. Kaito sneaks up on him doing the dishes one morning, snakes his arms around the traveller's waist and snuggles up against his back. Rantaro turns to kiss him on the nose, then returns his attention to the dishes. There's a faraway look in his eyes that's been there since they found out when Kaito was going to launch.

"Taro," Kaito mumbles, "I'm gonna miss you while I'm up there, y'know."

Rantaro hums back, noncommittal. "I'm sure you'll barely have any time to think of me." The words are said through a relaxed smile. Kaito can't even hear an edge in them. "It's what you've been building to all your life, isn't it? That's much more exciting than spending the next six months on the ground."

"Well, obviously." Kaito frowns. "The stars are my destiny. But the *other* important part of my destiny—"



“—will be right here cheering you on, and waiting for you to come home.” Rantaro meets Kaito’s frown with a charming, eye-twinkling grin. Kaito would almost believe it, too, if he were anyone else. “Don’t worry about it. Don’t you have training today? You should eat before you head out.”

The following evening, after dinner, Kaito finds Rantaro booking a flight for the day following Kaito’s launch. He’s seated in the dark in their bedroom, features cast a sickly blue by the dim glow of his laptop screen. His eyes are heavy with exhaustion, the kind Kaito only ever catches on him after he’s returned from an unsuccessful trip.

Without a word, Kaito creeps into the bedroom and sits beside Rantaro, curling an arm around his shoulders. Rantaro promptly shuts his laptop and turns, reciprocating the embrace with both arms and nuzzling his nose against Kaito’s.

“I didn’t hear you come in,” Rantaro whispers.

“You looked pretty busy,” Kaito returns. “Planning a trip?”

In the dark, it’s impossible to see what kind of face Rantaro is making now. Kaito can only hear the smile in his voice when he says, “Always am. You seem stiff, can I give you a massage? Training must be working you hard right now.”

And though Kaito grumbles, he ends up allowing it. Rantaro can be awfully persuasive when he wants to be, though it does help that Kaito’s always in the mood for a bit of tender loving care from his boyfriend. He intends to keep talking while Rantaro does his business, but the moment Rantaro’s hands land on Kaito’s shoulders, it’s a lost cause. It’s just impossible to focus on speaking when you have experienced hands working the tension from your joints.

Finally, four days before Kaito’s due to fly out, Kaito comes back from his last training with his sidekicks and finds Rantaro curled up on the couch, engulfed in one of Kaito’s hoodies. His phone is face-down on the coffee table, and his knees are hugged against his chest. He’s staring off into space with that same faraway gaze as always, his lower lip drawn between his teeth. Faint jazz music fills the living room, and Kaito recognises the song immediately: one of Kaito’s favourites, *Fly Me To The Moon* by Frank Sinatra.

...Rantaro’s really got it bad if he’s listening to that. Kaito shuts the front door with a click and it seems to snap Rantaro out of his daze, because he sits up suddenly and scrambles for his phone, turning off the music. Before Kaito

can even ask, Rantaro's on his feet, crossing the living room and disappearing into the bathroom.

"Rantaro—" Kaito starts.

"Gotta pee!" Rantaro's voice replies, muffled through the closed door. He sounds a bit choked up, and when he comes back from the bathroom, his eyes are puffy and red. Kaito tries more than once to bring it up, but Rantaro dismisses him each time in a voice so tired and sad that Kaito decides to let the topic rest for the night.




It's frustrating, though. Enough to still be weighing on Kaito's mind the following day.

His last three days on earth, save for launch day, are his to spend with his loved ones. With so much time already put into saying goodbye to his sidekicks and his grandparents, Kaito pencils in some time for his other close friends. The idea of taking off without properly saying goodbye to *everyone* in his life is just kind of unbearable. Kaito won't accept it.

First on the roster, right after breakfast, is Kaede, who invites Kaito over to her and Shuichi's shared apartment for a hype-performance of the theme song she wrote him and a fresh coat of nail polish. It's a little nostalgic. Kaito broke his arm back during their second year, and to help him regain the motor function required to do things like say, pilot a spaceship, Rantaro and Kaede taught him how to paint nails. It was fun then, and it certainly comes in handy now, seated on the floor of Kaede's bedroom and poring over shimmering bottles of polish.

Kaede's attention isn't on the makeup though. She regards Kaito with her usual shrewd eye, her head tilted slightly to the side. She braided her hair today, and when she tilts her head in the other direction, letting out a soft *hmm*, it flops over onto her other shoulder. Kaito has to snort at the display as he selects a dark blue to paint Kaede's nails.

"Something on your mind, Kaede?"



“Sort of!” Kaede puts out her hand to let Kaito start on her nails. Her cuticles are in pretty good shape. Kaede had only learned how to paint her nails in the first place from Rantaro, but she’s always been so diligent; ever since she learned about proper nail care, she’s been pretty attentive to it. Kaito admires that about her. His own cuticles are nowhere near as exemplary right now. “More like... I know something’s on yours. Did something happen?”

Tch. Figures she’d be able to parse that with a gaze. Kaito sighs, shaking his head. “Better to ask what *didn’t* happen... but today’s supposed to be fun. Don’t let me put that on your shoulders and then disappear for half a year.” He unscrews the base polish with a vengeance, pouting at Kaede’s fingertips.

Kaede giggles. “Isn’t that exactly why you should tell me if you want to, though? It’d be pretty sucky to go to space feeling miserable about something, right?”

“Well...” As always, Kaede’s got a point. Kaito sighs again. “It’s... about Rantaro. I know he’s takin’ the idea of me leaving for so long pretty hard, but he just won’t talk to me about it.” He flattens the brush against Kaede’s thumbnail. Base coats are always clear, so Kaito has to lean forward slightly to make sure he got full coverage. At least it keeps him from having to make eye contact while he talks about this. “I don’t know how to pry it out of him.”

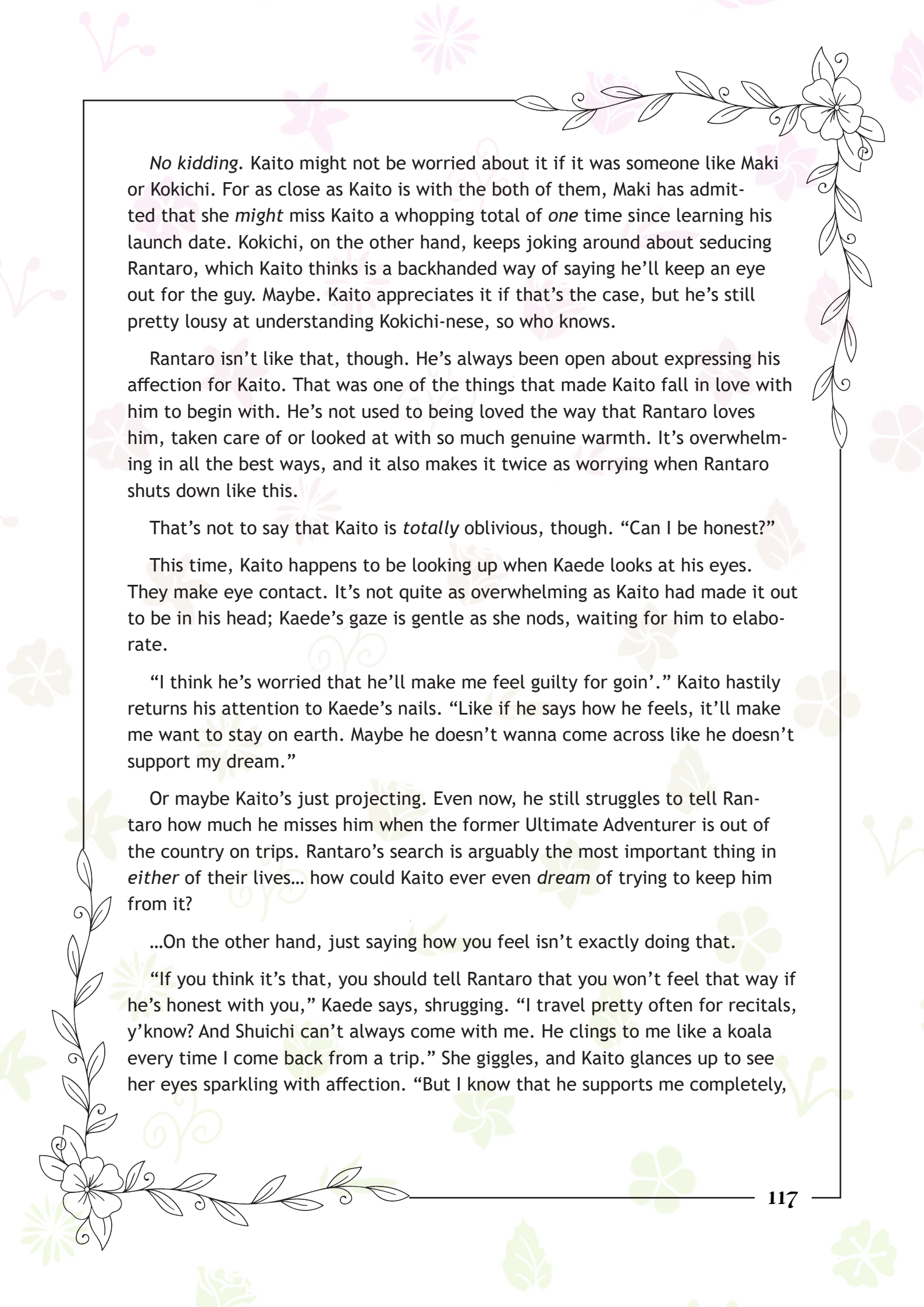
“You’re usually so good at that, too...” Kaede sounds a little thoughtful. “Then again, Rantaro’s pretty much your match in that area. He’s like the clam to your hungry crab.”

“...Can you use a different analogy?”

Giggling again, Kaede continues. “Rantaro... lost his sisters, right?” Her tone softens into something more subdued. “It makes sense that he’d be anxious about so much time apart... he’s pretty much always out of town though, isn’t he?”

“Yeah.” Kaito nods, releasing Kaede’s hand in favour of moving on to the other. “But he’s only usually out for a week, and sometimes I go with him. We usually call and text pretty much the whole time he’s gone, too. I can video call him from the space station, and send emails and stuff, but...”

“Pretty limited contact, got it.” Kaede sighs. “Yeah, it’s rough... you two definitely need to find a way to talk about it before you leave.”



No kidding. Kaito might not be worried about it if it was someone like Maki or Kokichi. For as close as Kaito is with the both of them, Maki has admitted that she *might* miss Kaito a whopping total of *one* time since learning his launch date. Kokichi, on the other hand, keeps joking around about seducing Rantaro, which Kaito thinks is a backhanded way of saying he'll keep an eye out for the guy. Maybe. Kaito appreciates it if that's the case, but he's still pretty lousy at understanding Kokichi-nese, so who knows.

Rantaro isn't like that, though. He's always been open about expressing his affection for Kaito. That was one of the things that made Kaito fall in love with him to begin with. He's not used to being loved the way that Rantaro loves him, taken care of or looked at with so much genuine warmth. It's overwhelming in all the best ways, and it also makes it twice as worrying when Rantaro shuts down like this.

That's not to say that Kaito is *totally* oblivious, though. "Can I be honest?"

This time, Kaito happens to be looking up when Kaede looks at his eyes. They make eye contact. It's not quite as overwhelming as Kaito had made it out to be in his head; Kaede's gaze is gentle as she nods, waiting for him to elaborate.

"I think he's worried that he'll make me feel guilty for goin'." Kaito hastily returns his attention to Kaede's nails. "Like if he says how he feels, it'll make me want to stay on earth. Maybe he doesn't wanna come across like he doesn't support my dream."

Or maybe Kaito's just projecting. Even now, he still struggles to tell Rantaro how much he misses him when the former Ultimate Adventurer is out of the country on trips. Rantaro's search is arguably the most important thing in *either* of their lives... how could Kaito ever even *dream* of trying to keep him from it?

...On the other hand, just saying how you feel isn't exactly doing that.

"If you think it's that, you should tell Rantaro that you won't feel that way if he's honest with you," Kaede says, shrugging. "I travel pretty often for recitals, y'know? And Shuichi can't always come with me. He clings to me like a koala every time I come back from a trip." She giggles, and Kaito glances up to see her eyes sparkling with affection. "But I know that he supports me completely,

even though he always complains about missing me. You of all people are pretty much in the perfect spot to tell him the same.”

It’s a solid plan. Kaito’s never had difficulty being direct with Rantaro either, not when it comes to *Rantaro’s* feelings. The only issue is...

“How do I get him to even have that conversation, though?” Kaito’s brow knits. “Somehow he always finds a way to change the subject back to me, the fucker.”

Kaede giggles. “Turnabout’s fair play, Kaito. You did that to me and Shuichi all the time in first year.”

“Th-That’s not the point!”

With another laugh, Kaede clears her throat. Kaito finishes her base layer and releases her hand, and almost immediately, Kaede’s cupped her chin in her palm, smiling.

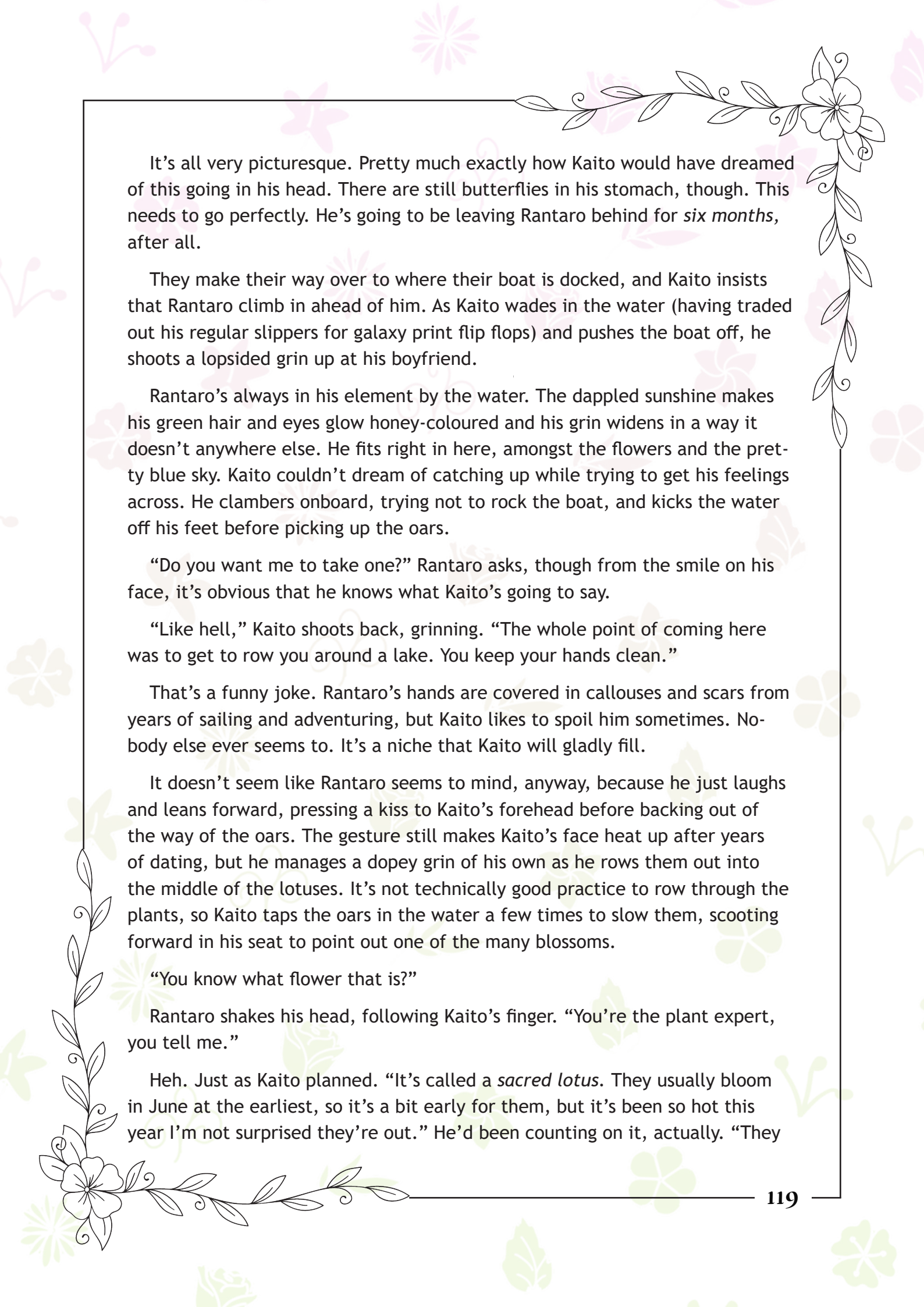
“I guess you’ll just have to find a way to make it important, right? *Make* him listen to you. Take him somewhere he can’t distract you.”

Take him somewhere, huh? Kaito leans back, chewing the inside of his cheek as he considers it. Maybe...



Kaito is extremely fortunate that it’s not quite close enough to summer for the rainy season to have started yet. The cherry blossoms are just about reaching the end of their bloom, and the weather is getting warmer and brighter as the days carry on. Pretty much the perfect conditions for a trip out onto the lake.

Rantaro owns a fair amount of boats, but it feels a little weird to treat your boyfriend using one of *his own* vehicles, so Kaito drags him out to a lake in the middle of the day on Monday when all the students will still be in class and rents them a rowboat. There’s just the slightest of breezes causing ripples in the lake, but the water is as clear as glass, reflecting the vibrant blue of the sky and the decadent white clouds. Sacred lotus flowers grow in bunches around the lake, dots of pink amidst forest green.



It's all very picturesque. Pretty much exactly how Kaito would have dreamed of this going in his head. There are still butterflies in his stomach, though. This needs to go perfectly. He's going to be leaving Rantaro behind for *six months*, after all.

They make their way over to where their boat is docked, and Kaito insists that Rantaro climb in ahead of him. As Kaito wades in the water (having traded out his regular slippers for galaxy print flip flops) and pushes the boat off, he shoots a lopsided grin up at his boyfriend.

Rantaro's always in his element by the water. The dappled sunshine makes his green hair and eyes glow honey-coloured and his grin widens in a way it doesn't anywhere else. He fits right in here, amongst the flowers and the pretty blue sky. Kaito couldn't dream of catching up while trying to get his feelings across. He clambers onboard, trying not to rock the boat, and kicks the water off his feet before picking up the oars.

"Do you want me to take one?" Rantaro asks, though from the smile on his face, it's obvious that he knows what Kaito's going to say.

"Like hell," Kaito shoots back, grinning. "The whole point of coming here was to get to row you around a lake. You keep your hands clean."

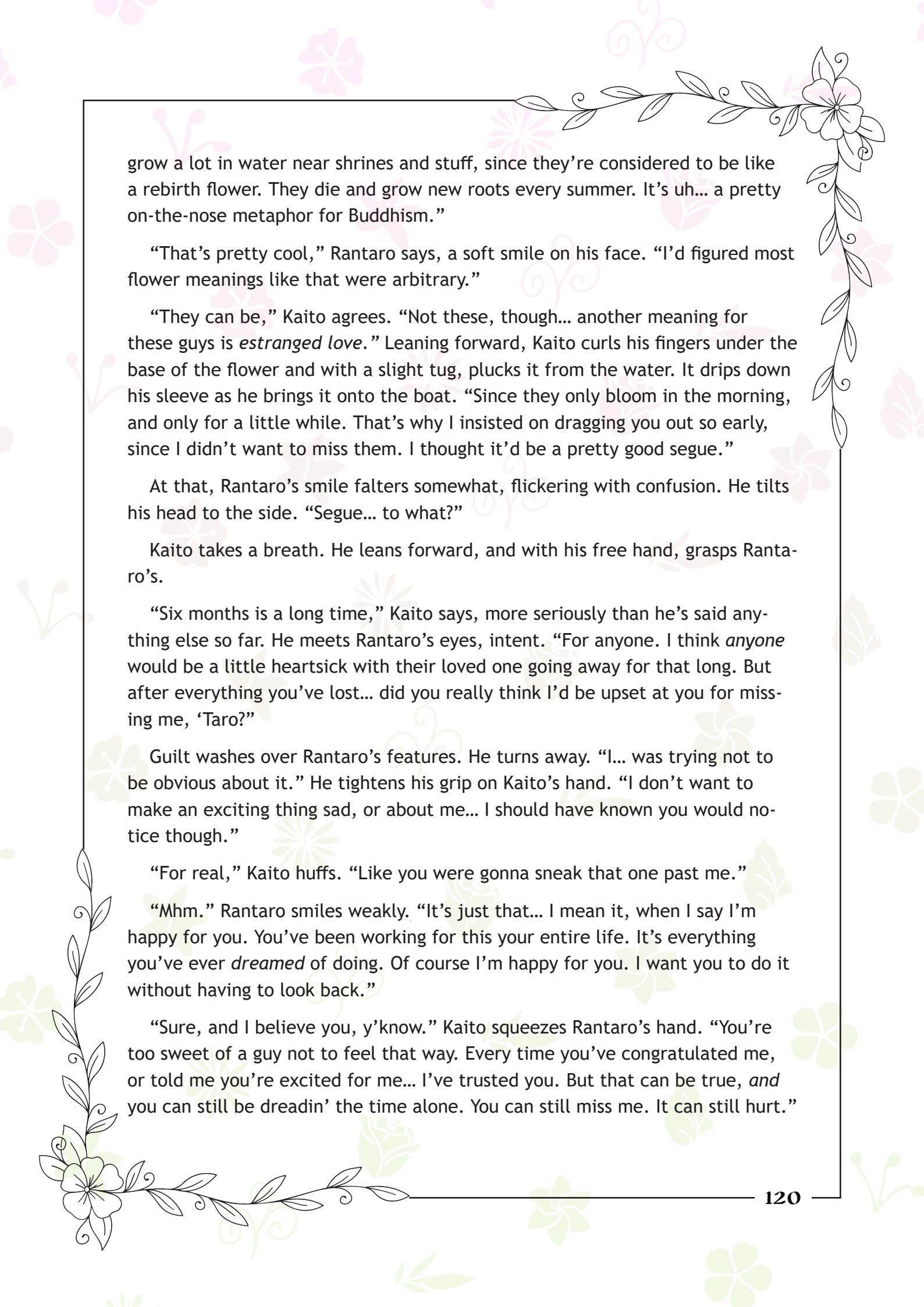
That's a funny joke. Rantaro's hands are covered in callouses and scars from years of sailing and adventuring, but Kaito likes to spoil him sometimes. Nobody else ever seems to. It's a niche that Kaito will gladly fill.

It doesn't seem like Rantaro seems to mind, anyway, because he just laughs and leans forward, pressing a kiss to Kaito's forehead before backing out of the way of the oars. The gesture still makes Kaito's face heat up after years of dating, but he manages a dopey grin of his own as he rows them out into the middle of the lotuses. It's not technically good practice to row through the plants, so Kaito taps the oars in the water a few times to slow them, scooting forward in his seat to point out one of the many blossoms.

"You know what flower that is?"

Rantaro shakes his head, following Kaito's finger. "You're the plant expert, you tell me."

Heh. Just as Kaito planned. "It's called a *sacred lotus*. They usually bloom in June at the earliest, so it's a bit early for them, but it's been so hot this year I'm not surprised they're out." He'd been counting on it, actually. "They



grow a lot in water near shrines and stuff, since they're considered to be like a rebirth flower. They die and grow new roots every summer. It's uh... a pretty on-the-nose metaphor for Buddhism."

"That's pretty cool," Rantaro says, a soft smile on his face. "I'd figured most flower meanings like that were arbitrary."

"They can be," Kaito agrees. "Not these, though... another meaning for these guys is *estranged love*." Leaning forward, Kaito curls his fingers under the base of the flower and with a slight tug, plucks it from the water. It drips down his sleeve as he brings it onto the boat. "Since they only bloom in the morning, and only for a little while. That's why I insisted on dragging you out so early, since I didn't want to miss them. I thought it'd be a pretty good segue."

At that, Rantaro's smile falters somewhat, flickering with confusion. He tilts his head to the side. "Segue... to what?"

Kaito takes a breath. He leans forward, and with his free hand, grasps Rantaro's.

"Six months is a long time," Kaito says, more seriously than he's said anything else so far. He meets Rantaro's eyes, intent. "For anyone. I think *anyone* would be a little heartsick with their loved one going away for that long. But after everything you've lost... did you really think I'd be upset at you for missing me, 'Taro?"

Guilt washes over Rantaro's features. He turns away. "I... was trying not to be obvious about it." He tightens his grip on Kaito's hand. "I don't want to make an exciting thing sad, or about me... I should have known you would notice though."

"For real," Kaito huffs. "Like you were gonna sneak that one past me."

"Mhm." Rantaro smiles weakly. "It's just that... I mean it, when I say I'm happy for you. You've been working for this your entire life. It's everything you've ever *dreamed* of doing. Of course I'm happy for you. I want you to do it without having to look back."

"Sure, and I believe you, y'know." Kaito squeezes Rantaro's hand. "You're too sweet of a guy not to feel that way. Every time you've congratulated me, or told me you're excited for me... I've trusted you. But that can be true, *and* you can still be dreadin' the time alone. You can still miss me. It can still hurt."

Rantaro's eyes flit back to Kaito. They're a bit wet. "Kaito..."

"Taro, you're the love of my life," Kaito whispers. "You're one of the biggest reasons I get up in the morning... and you're gonna be the reason I come home, when the mission is done. While I'm up there, I'll be enjoying every second of it... but I'll be thinking of you, too. And calling whenever I can. I'm gonna miss you with everything in me."

"I..." Rantaro lets out a watery laugh. A tear trickles down his cheek, and Kaito shuffles a little, annoyed that he has no free hands to reach up and brush it away. "God. I don't know... what did I ever do to deserve you?"

Kaito smiles wryly. "You know, I ask myself that same question all the time."

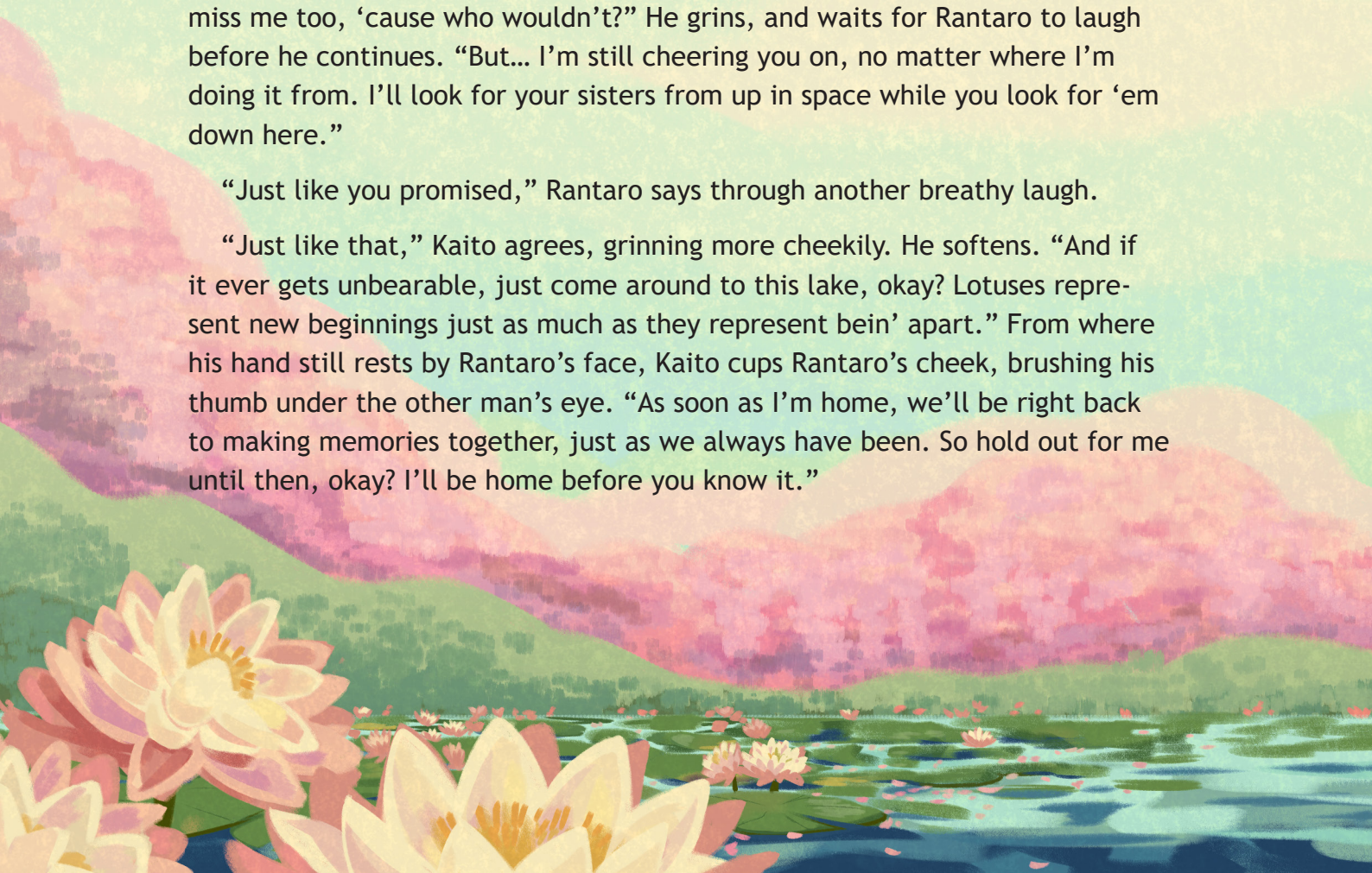
He tucks the lotus in his hand behind Rantaro's ear. The stem is muddy enough to drip lake gunk onto Rantaro's shirt, and it immediately wets his hair, but as Kaito lets out a hiss and reaches out to fix it, Rantaro's own hand shoots up to stop him, trapping both Kaito's fingers and the lotus stem in place. His eyes are still teary, but his grin is broad, lopsided in the way it only ever gets when he really means it.

"Don't," Rantaro insists. "I like it."

"In that case, maybe I'll get you a dry one next time," Kaito sighs. He shakes his head. "It's gonna be hard, y'know? I'll be missing you. And I know you'll miss me too, 'cause who wouldn't?" He grins, and waits for Rantaro to laugh before he continues. "But... I'm still cheering you on, no matter where I'm doing it from. I'll look for your sisters from up in space while you look for 'em down here."

"Just like you promised," Rantaro says through another breathy laugh.

"Just like that," Kaito agrees, grinning more cheekily. He softens. "And if it ever gets unbearable, just come around to this lake, okay? Lotuses represent new beginnings just as much as they represent bein' apart." From where his hand still rests by Rantaro's face, Kaito cups Rantaro's cheek, brushing his thumb under the other man's eye. "As soon as I'm home, we'll be right back to making memories together, just as we always have been. So hold out for me until then, okay? I'll be home before you know it."



Sniffing quietly, Rantaro releases Kaito's hands. He leans forward, resting his palms against Kaito's thighs, and it's only when he's close enough for their noses to touch that Kaito realises this is a kiss.

An involuntary "Oh—" leaves Kaito in the split second before their lips meet, but he still returns the kiss with energy, his own hands moving to hold Rantaro by the shoulders. Rantaro is emotional, and Kaito can tell, because he drags out the kiss for twice as long as he usually would before pulling away.

When he does pull away, though, and when Kaito opens his eyes, the sparkle in Rantaro's is enough to make his heart skip a beat.

"I love you," Rantaro says. "I'll be rooting for you the entire time you're up there, too, so don't let me down, yeah?" He smiles now, the full and genuine smile he reserves for Kaito only. "I'll be here when you come home."

"And I'll come home," Kaito returns, a touch breathless from the kiss. He rests his forehead against Rantaro's and exhales past the lump in his throat. He feels like crying, but it would be a good cry, he thinks. The kind of cry you only get after finally saying something you needed to. "I love you too, Rantaro. I'll come home."

It's funny. When Kaito comes home, it'll be November. The sacred lotuses will be out of season, and the weather will be getting cooler and drier as Japan prepares itself for winter. It's so long from now, Kaito almost can't even conceive of it... yet strangely it feels closer to him than it ever has. His new beginning, once he's conquered the stars and shown to the world what he's always been capable of.

And Rantaro will be waiting for him when that day comes. Yeah, Kaito thinks he can be patient for a little while longer, too. For just as long as it takes.







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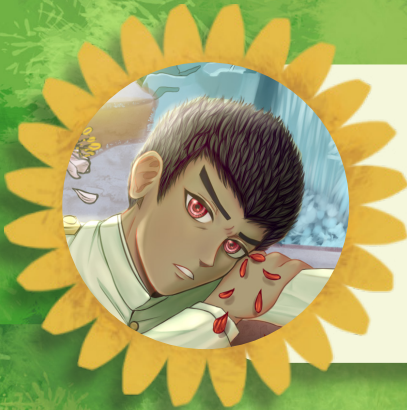
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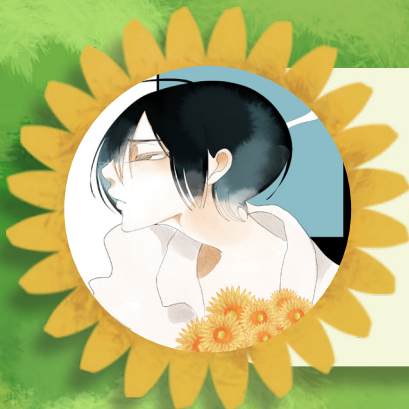


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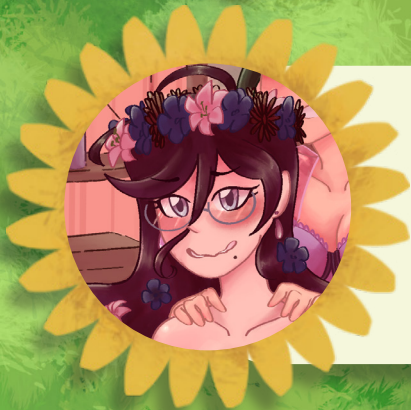
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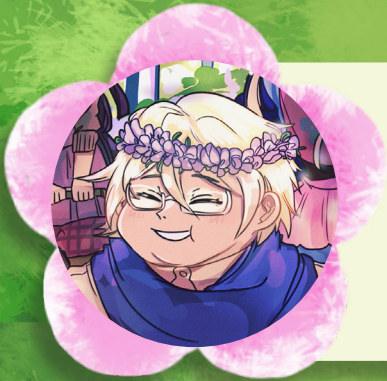
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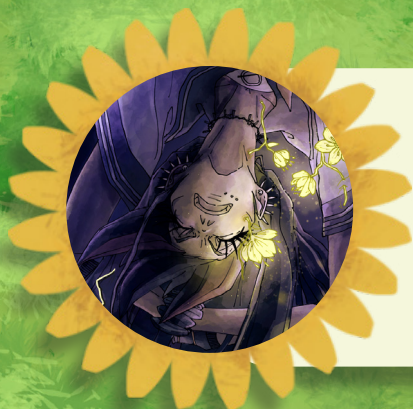
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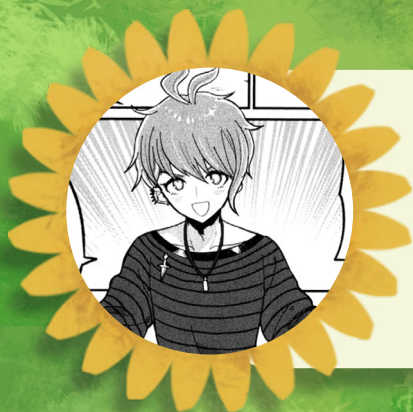
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